

JOSEPH  
CONRAD

RICHARD CURLE



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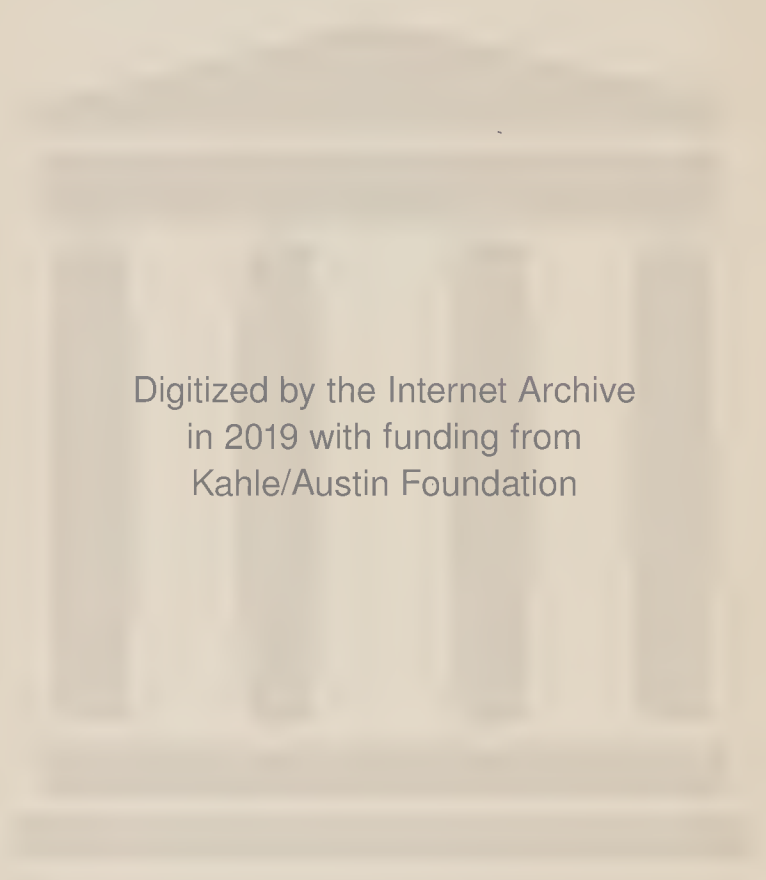


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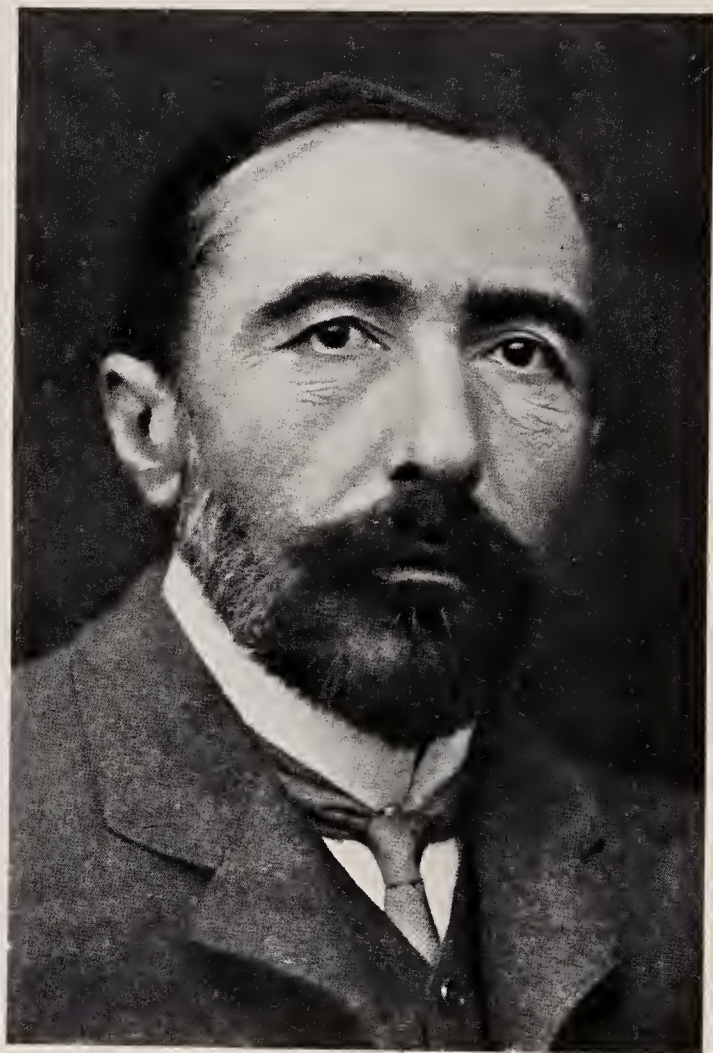
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**JOSEPH CONRAD**







JOSEPH CONRAD

# JOSEPH CONRAD

## A STUDY

BY

RICHARD CURLE

AUTHOR OF

'ASPECTS OF GEORGE MEREDITH,' 'SHADOWS OUT OF THE CROWD'  
'LIFE IS A DREAM'

WITH A FRONTISPIECE

'Efficiency of a practically flawless kind may be reached naturally in the struggle for bread. But there is something beyond—a higher point, a subtle and unmistakable touch of love and pride beyond mere skill; almost an inspiration which gives to all work that finish which is almost art—which *is* art.'

*The Mirror of the Sea*

GARDEN CITY

NEW YORK

DOUBLEDAY, PAGE & COMPANY

1914

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TO  
CONSTANTIN PHOTIADÈS,  
NOVELIST AND CRITIC

004051



## PREFACE

THE facts in this book relative to Mr Conrad have Mr Conrad's authorization, the criticism is entirely my own affair.

No one can realize more clearly than I the difficulty of writing a pioneer book about Mr Conrad's works. My excuse for doing it must be my excuse for the way in which it is done. There are many points that need further developing—the individual structure of the books, for instance, the general sense of form, the realism and romance of Mr Conrad's art, his feeling for tragedy, and his philosophy. As to this last, I must admit that I dislike the habit of writing gravely about the philosophy of novelists. That is to wreck the meaning of a work of art, although it is true enough that art divorced from ideas soon wears very thin. A novelist's philosophy, as such, does not concern literary criticism, although his personality, which is largely the accumulative effect of his outlook, does. The purely moral treatise type of fiction is neither more nor less ridiculous than the type which is concerned wholly with experiments in form. As in everything else, common sense is the surest guide in criticism.

Let me point out here that part of my object in writing this book is to arouse interest in the greatest

and least known of Mr Conrad's novels, in the marvellous *Nostromo*. My judgment in regard to this novel is, I believe, heterodox, and I am aware that it is almost impossible to convert critics who have already made up their minds, but I do hope that what I have to say will have some influence.

This study of Mr Conrad has been written both for the students of his work and for those who know nothing about it. (The last part of Chapter II. and all of Chapter III. are especially intended for the latter.) But throughout I have aimed at real criticism and not mere statement or, in fact, mere rhetoric. I should like to add that I have received many very valuable suggestions from various friends, of which I have made the freest use.

But, indeed, Mr Conrad is in some respects his own best critic. Readers of *Some Reminiscences* will remember that that book is full of remarks as to his methods and ideas—criticism of the subtlest and most distinguished order. ("Conrad's Achievement in the Light of his own Criticism" would make an absorbing twelfth chapter to this study.) But it is in *The New Review* for 1897, in that discarded Preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* that Mr Conrad has most beautifully crystallized the very foundations of his artistic ideals. Those forgotten pages should be in the hands of every student of Mr Conrad's work.

R. C.

April 1914

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# JOSEPH CONRAD

## CHAPTER I

### CONRAD, HIS CRITICS AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES

I HAVE long wished to say something about Conrad which could not be said in the space of a single article. Since I first began to read his books I have been drawn to them to a very unusual extent. And that must be my chief excuse for doing what it is generally ridiculous to do, writing a book about a living author. In fact, to write books at all about authors is rather stupid. People form their opinions for themselves. Moreover, time settles all questions of merit with a pretty accurate hand. Yes, it is so, and for my final justification I must fall back on a profound conviction. And my conviction is this—that Conrad's work actually does mark a new epoch.

I know that it is easy, and not in the least convincing, to make such statements, and that the only proof of the pudding is in the eating. And therefore I would urge every reader of this book to study Conrad for himself. For criticism, unlike creation, has few magic words at its service. There is a kind of intuitive accord that seems to defy expression, a kind of close and familiar appreciation that seems to illumine the mind and to paralyse the tongue. The business of criticism is to surmount this *impasse* between conviction and the power to convince. And I believe that it can be done. No doubt the magic word would

clothe the voiceless perception in a way that logic alone could not, for it would be the creative element in criticism and would possess the illusive qualities of the thing criticised, but, failing that, the same result can be attained, at last, by absolute sincerity and sympathy. In the long run these do achieve their purpose, they do present a real picture, they do surmount the fearful obstacle of which all critics are so acutely aware. And that is what I would like to claim for this monograph. I have studied Conrad's works very closely and I have come to some definite conclusions. It is these that I present here as well as I can.

Of course, Conrad is an exceptionally difficult writer to discuss. He is one of these men whose extraordinarily vivid personality pervades everything he writes to such an extent that a good many people do find him impossible to read. One must differentiate all this from mere mannerism, the mannerism that spoils such writers as Meredith and Hugo. It is not mannerism in the case of men like Conrad, that is to say, it is not the mannerism of eccentricity, it is the positive strength of their personality. Flaubert, for instance, an indubitably great artist, arouses this antipathy to a marked degree. He could efface himself in one sense, but in another he was visible in every line of his work, and not only visible, because, of course, everyone who is anyone is that, but visible in a singular and almost menacing fashion. He sets up in certain minds a temperamental antagonism. Nor is he unique in that. Other commanding writers do the same, such writers as Dostoievsky and Walt Whitman, for instance. And now, as far as I can judge, we have to add Conrad to this list. Some people of intelligence are quite hostile to Conrad. I



think it must be that he seems to envelop things with his own sombre and poetic imagination rather than show them to us in their actual light. Take, for example, his story "Youth" and contrast it with Hudson's *The Purple Land*. Essentially they are both concerned with the same idea—the glamour and romance of youth; but I can quite understand people asserting that Hudson's story does give the feeling of youth, whereas Conrad's story gives only a philosophic dream of what youth ought to be. Even if that were true, which I doubt, I do not think it matters (it is the difference between a self-conscious and an unself-conscious artist); but I see why the supposition might arise, and, in seeing that, I grasp what it is about Conrad that is antipathetic to some. It is his passionately romantic, melancholy, and ironic mind.

But, of course, there is also a much simpler reason. To read Conrad calls for exertion, and nowadays that is enough to damn anyone. The exertion arises from the fact that he is imaginative, and requires, in his readers, a corresponding and increasing effort of the imagination. Reading him, as a friend of mine says, is "like a leap of the mind." And, furthermore, he is a visualiser. To follow him we have to form very definite images. He actually excites the optic nerve. Unless the reader is prepared for this effort he will lose half the effect. And, again, although he is romantic and a visualiser yet he is emphatically a man of hard edges. In a few words he can create a sharp outline. This is an almost unique gift, and combined as it is with his romantic manner, is quite sufficient to arouse our lurking and natural antagonism for the unexpected.

And Conrad's reputation suffers from another and

a much more insidious cause. It appears to me that he is positively misunderstood by many of the people who admire him most. I do not know how I can put it better than by saying that he is regarded as the author of *Lord Jim* rather than as the author of *Nostromo*. Anyone who really understands Conrad will follow me. For *Lord Jim*, powerful as it is, is representative, on the whole, of the more ordinary and didactic side of Conrad, whereas the neglected *Nostromo* is representative of a much subtler, more moving, and more truly creative side. Indeed, *Nostromo* has an imaginative maturity quite beyond the scope of *Lord Jim*. That one instance gives us the key to a widespread misconception about Conrad—a misconception none the less complete and all the more difficult to refute from the fact that it is half-hidden under the guise of judicial wisdom. I don't want to be misapprehended. I only take the question of *Lord Jim* and *Nostromo* as a sort of symbol to explain something I find it hard to explain. It seems to me that the really poetical and thrilling things in Conrad are largely ignored and that they are ignored because most of the critics are upon the wrong tack. Most, not all. Moreover, there is a kind of Conrad "tradition" in the air—a thing as deadly to a man as a spider's web to a fly. For a tradition enwraps an artist's endeavour in a mist of delicate falsehood. How many careers have been ruined by an epigram? And though Conrad is obviously too striking a writer to be summarised in a phrase, still the critics have begun to expect from him work of a certain kind. Not only is he pre-judged, which at the best is a stultifying process, but he is pre-judged along bad lines. These "traditions" about authors are always dangerous, and when they are positively wrong then the whole critical

ground slips from under the feet. Year by year Conrad is emerging into recognition, a Conrad famous, respected, but a Conrad more or less "placed." And "placing" is a compliment which is meant to round you off for good and all.

These charges are vague, indeed, and hard to substantiate. There has been little set criticism of Conrad and the ordinary book review is notoriously untrustworthy. Of course, I do not mean to say there has not been *some* good criticism. The most penetrating I have read was that by Ford Madox Hueffer in *The English Review* for December 1911. Unfortunately it is very slight. But, indeed, it is to Edward Garnett that readers of Conrad owe the greatest debt. For he was the first to "discover" him—if I must use such an offensive expression. That his earliest work should have fallen into the hands of this eclectic and un-insular critic is something to be thankful for. For Conrad has told me, himself, that if *Almayer's Folly* had been rejected he would never have written another book. But, except for such rare and shining exceptions, we can put all the criticisms aside. If I had to prove my point from them alone it would be easy enough. Denser ineptitudes never gave heartier praise to an original genius. I include my own past writings. But in saying that discerning critics miss the best in Conrad I am not talking so much of the written word. The wisest remarks about modern authors are nearly always those spoken, and it is in conversation, mainly, that one feels the pulse of current opinion. And though I have heard some very wise and piercing things said about Conrad the general pulse is beating in a groove and beating in vain. And in all this, let me emphasise, I am not referring to his enemies but to his admirers.

For it is they who have leavened public taste in regard to Conrad.

In making the general statement that Conrad is not properly understood I do not want to run my head against a wall. I know I put my case roughly. Such impressions are often only highly sensitive reactions and as such quite beyond positive proof. A parrot cry is easy to lay hold of, but a mental attitude is like a will-o'-the-wisp. Besides, criticism has become something of an intellectual vested interest. When critics get hold of an author they are not only annoyed if outsiders disagree with them, but they are annoyed if the author, himself, disagrees. In other words, they are pained when an author's work does not fit into their preconceived theories about it. That is one reason why critics are so fond of labels. The more remarkable the author the more intolerant are they of his reputation. This is curious but easily explicable. Anyone whose personality lies strongly upon his work is bound to affect his readers in a very definite way. At once an image is formed, which is cherished like a fetish and guarded with an excluding jealousy. Such images are precious, dogmatic, and easily outraged. (I need only instance the reception of *The Secret Agent* in Conrad's case.) Whatever happens, the author is prejudged. And in my opinion Conrad is in grave peril of this. The final word on him trembles upon the critics' lips.

The truth of the matter is that Conrad, as a phenomenon, is as yet but little realised. He is still confounded with men of talent. For it is hard to believe that a real genius can have arisen with so small a perceptible stir. Conrad never woke to find himself suddenly famous. And the very scope and essence of his originality is bewildering. For he is not simply



original in the ordinary sense, he is volcanic without being anarchic. There is nothing bizarre about Conrad. His work belongs to a tradition (not an English tradition, it is true), but it no more resembles the work from which it derives than a fish spued up from the bottom of the Atlantic might resemble a fish of the surface except in so far as they were both fishes. The volcanic in Conrad staggers some people, whereas his lack of anarchy and fanaticism annoys others. For in England an original writer is the man of ideas rather than the man of subtlety. We want brilliance, and if we cannot have brilliance we want a problem. It is not the least surprising that men like Shaw, Wells, and Galsworthy are so influential. They are influential because they are representative of the best side of English insularity. Of course their popularity is as nothing compared to that of Florence Barclay or Hall Caine, and perhaps not even so big as that of the society novelists, Hichens, Benson, Locke, and so on, but they are probably as popular as any intellectuals are ever likely to be with us. Conrad's genius, on the other hand, is foreign to even the most advanced English tradition. He is not concerned with righting the world and he is not sparkling. He is neither the novelist of himself like Chesterton nor the novelist of types like Meredith. He is the novelist of real people. Such impersonality has never been appreciated in England. And Conrad's romantic spirit, too, is alien to the English mind. It is not the mere spirit of improbable adventure, but a sort of philosophy impressing itself with ardour and pessimism upon the splendour and darkness of the world. Romance as the last word of realism is an uncomfortable idea. People hasten to explain it by the word "Slavonic," just as they hasten to explain the exuberance of his

style by the words "The Tropics"—if, indeed, anyone who so transgresses the ideals of Pater and Wilde can be said to have a style at all.

To speak frankly, there is a far-reaching popular delusion as to style. What is regarded by many people as style is technique of a particularly conceited and self-conscious type. Not only has taste for the negative qualities been obliterated, but taste for the robust personal qualities as well. I discuss Conrad's prose elsewhere, so will merely say here that his defects and his qualities alike would horrify a "stylist." Who can wonder at the reaction against style or blame those who consider it a devilish invention, banishing jollity and humanity? Better far revert to fire-works, morality, and complicated plots than swoon with "stylists" in a garden of roses.

That Conrad should have an increasing reputation on the Continent is not astonishing, for, after all, his affinities lie there, but that he is now considerably read in England and America calls for some remark. Of course, there is a fashion in these things, founded chiefly on curiosity and vanity, but we must suppose, also, that Conrad's enormous power has really begun to make headway against prejudice. If ever a man has forced the enemy's gate that man is Conrad. It is an odd thing that both in England and America deep originality is generally appreciated in the long run though it may not be much understood. And in both countries people are now becoming "aware" of Conrad, although he is too massive to be seen clearly all at once. It is always thus.

But when we talk of Conrad's popularity (for fame is not popularity) we must bear in mind that there are other reasons that militate against him. He is aloof not only in his style but in his whole manner and

range of subject. He does not give us the warm, comfortable feeling of an Arnold Bennett. About him there is not that placid, unhurried faculty which makes Bennett's finest novels so engrossing and so easy to read. Conrad is as restless as the sea. And his sardonic humour hovers over his work with a suggestion, not so much of mockery as in Anatole France, as of disillusionment. His irony can be severe (as in "Heart of Darkness"), or it can be a form of pity (as in "Freya of the Seven Islands"), but in any case it is "un-English." And furthermore, his psychology is partly developed in disquieting hints—in that resembling the wonderful psychology of Dostoievsky. In no sense is Conrad a "homely" writer. He knows too much about "the secret of hearts" to be that, even had he placed the scenes of his books in the valley of the Thames instead of in the wild places of dark continents, as he usually does. And, indeed, when he chooses London for his scene, as in *The Secret Agent*, there is something mysterious and exotic in his touch which throws a film of sinister romance over the friendly city.

And then, again, Conrad is not preoccupied solely with the emotion of love. That, generally speaking, is the great touchstone of popularity, although, strangely enough, two of the most popular of modern writers, Stevenson and Synge, did try to avoid it as much as possible. It is a sickness that has affected nearly every writer of our time with a fatal loss of the sense of proportion. Of course, literature has always concerned itself with passion, but it is only recently, as time goes, that it has turned it into a universally morbid disease. Introspection has much to answer for in art even if it has unbared for us the last shelters of egoism.

Although Conrad is an artist there is nothing in

him of that pale phantom "art for art's sake." After all, he is absorbed with life, and his choice of words and his descriptive ability are part of, and not distinct from, that illusion of reality which he is intent on creating. You will not find in him the corrupt simplicity of a George Moore or the dashing pose of a Cunninghame Graham. And being entirely natural he is neither purposely hectic like Masefield, nor purposely vulgar like Kipling. His work, like the work of Henry James, is essentially dignified and quite untinged by the pettiness of conscious self-approval. That is not to deny that it is mannered. In its own way it is as mannered as the work of Stevenson. But Stevenson allowed his love of words to get between him and his object, whereas Conrad, with a similar love of words, realises that they are subordinate to the object itself. Both Conrad and Henry James have a passion for their theme. And thus their mannerisms have a genuine ring and, not being an aim in themselves, merge at last, together with all their other idiosyncrasies, into one revelation of the "grand manner"—a term for expressing real eminence in art.

Although a writer of Conrad's calibre must eventually have been recognised, still it is interesting to notice that he did appear at a rather favourable moment. Within the last few years a new and vitalising energy has been breathed into English literature, which had been languishing deplorably since the early '90's, since the end of the æsthetes and the dawn of the empire builders. Men of concrete vigour and tireless production are now the leaders. And it is on the crest of their popularity that Conrad, himself outside and beyond their ideals, has achieved fame. Let me make myself clear. He could not have gained his reputation



unless he had been what he is, but under the anæmic conditions of twenty years ago he could hardly have gained it at all. A wave of sound common sense has blown the cobwebs out of English literature—(that it has blown in other obnoxious things in their stead is not our business here). Conrad could only be understood in a society where reality had some sort of a hold.

But I will venture the remark that it is Stevenson, rather than the contributors to *The Yellow Book* or *The National Observer*, who has poisoned our English critical intelligence for a decade. For Stevenson's appeal is more cunning. He is neither unhealthy nor exaggerated and he does not lay himself open to ridicule or hatred. Our error has been in taking him too seriously. Why should this charming light-weight be considered a demi-god? His mind was intelligent, humane, but not particularly distinguished, and his style was a transparent and empty mannerism. But his personality was attractive and his appeal has the glitter of romance. And the result of it all is really disastrous. In innumerable minds he is now the model of what an artist should be. And by this standard the great masters are judged and found wanting. Stevenson sailed delightfully over the surface, little guessing of the tragic depths waiting to be plumbed by men like Conrad.

Well, this is something of a digression, but it may serve to show one of the reasons why such a writer as Conrad finds himself, so to speak, on virgin soil in England. People take a long time to admit that there are two sides to a question and a still longer to admit that the second side may be the correct one. And even if they allow Conrad to be an artist, his art may seem to them almost purposeless. Realism

uncoloured by erotic emotion appears to belie its title. In England one allows for the attenuated mysticism of a W. B. Yeats or a Rabindranath Tagore, and one allows for the frank sensuality of an H. G. Wells or a D. H. Lawrence, but one looks askance at an austere morality that is founded neither on the life of dreams nor on the restraint of the senses. That remark of Giorgio Viola's at the end of *Nostromo*, "when everything is shattering about his head, "Si—duty," falls upon inattentive ears. Few of us can even appreciate the incorruptibility of the old Garibaldino. But to Conrad duty is the basis not only of existence but of art itself. I state this with no moralising significance—Conrad's work is built upon no idea other than that of reality. But to him sincerity, duty, self-command are essential to reality. Without them there is only the chaos of anarchy. That is why so much modern literature is worthless—because, in its very essence, it is insincere and consequently anarchic. For there is as much anarchy in the banal as in Post-Impressionism.

I have no wish, in this chapter, to be led into a discussion of Conrad's work or point of view. I just put forward these instances to try to account, in part, for his lack of wider and deeper appreciation. There are yet other causes no doubt. A certain indirectness in his manner of narration must explain a good deal, and a monotonous richness of language in his earlier work has certainly repelled many. The popular idea of Conrad as a "picturesque" writer is unfortunate, because people at once jump to the conclusion that he is that and nothing more. In the ordinary way there is not much critical discrimination in England and one false cry may help or retard a man's reputation for years. Still, why should I labour a subject that

will soon be merely historical? For I am sure that Conrad's day is at hand and that once his sun has risen it will not set.

I do not mean, of course, that he will ever be popular. His work is not cast in that mould. But I mean that he will be genuinely revered. The popular appeal is not necessarily debased and Conrad's work loses something by not possessing it. It loses a certain universal significance which is the birthright of those artists, such artists as Shakespeare, or Turgenev, or even Maupassant, who have also been popular. And it must be understood that by artists I mean realists. In my opinion realists are the only true artists in fiction. And I do not mean the realism of a Zola which is coarseness or the realism of a Dickens which is caricature—I mean, essentially, the realism of a writer like Turgenev or Conrad, the realism, in fact, of typical and distinguished reality. Anthony Trollope, it is true, is a realist, but he has obviously a second rate intelligence and therefore his creations are wanting in the highest actuality. They are not imagined with the passionate nuances of real life. So when I say that Conrad lacks the popular appeal I am not really meaning the appeal of a man like Dickens (great genius though he is), but rather the appeal of a man of his own *genre* such as Turgenev.

There is something exalted in Conrad's creations which will for ever keep them slightly apart from widespread sympathy. We must grasp that when comparing him with his contemporaries, some of whom have more than a touch of this intimate, universal appeal. In a sense it is easier to get *en rapport* with the people of Gissing or Bennett than with the people of Conrad. This is partly for two reasons. Firstly, they have a wider general interest, and secondly they

lack just that touch of distinction which is inherent in the projections of a mind as subtly reserved as Conrad's. About all Conrad's work there is a kind of aristocratic flavour which has nothing directly to do with the work itself. Just consider the difference between his view of the East and Kipling's view. There is something sublime about one and something cockney about the other. Conrad is a philosopher and Kipling is an observer. Both have sanity (that uncommon possession), both know their subject, both show literary genius—and yet no two men could be further apart. For Conrad has his eye upon destiny, whereas Kipling has his eye upon Simla society.

Of course, there is a good deal of unfairness in this comparison—as there is in all such comparisons. One sets out to prove a point and one proves it—but other people may not agree that the point is worth proving or that it has, indeed, been fairly proved. On certain formulas one can demonstrate that almost anyone is either great or negligible. Fortunately unbacked *ex parte* statements do not carry conviction. I say all this because I am unwilling that people should think that I am simply putting Conrad on a pinnacle. I quite realise Conrad's defects and I quite realise other people's merits. But perfection is not necessarily a criterion of genius and the finest writers may be the easiest to criticise. What differentiates Conrad from nearly all his contemporaries is the quality of greatness. He is on a different plane, as it were, and therefore comparisons are almost certain to miss the real point. I present this here as an opinion, but in the following pages I hope to demonstrate it as a truth.

## CHAPTER II

### CONRAD'S BIOGRAPHY AND AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL BOOKS

IN this chapter I mean to give, first of all, in a perfectly concise and colourless form, the salient facts of Conrad's life up to the time of his leaving the sea, and then I mean to examine in a more literary and romantic sense his two books of recollections, *Some Reminiscences* and *The Mirror of the Sea*. And I hope to throw some light on the autobiographical basis of many of Conrad's stories. But I would like to say, straight off, that this chapter will not be of much value to the critic for, like the one that follows it, it is informative rather than critical. That stands to reason.

Teodor Jozef Konrad Korzeniowski was born in the Ukraine in the South of Poland on 6th December 1857. In 1861 he removed to Warsaw with his parents, and in 1862 his father, who had been deeply implicated in the last Polish rebellion, was banished to Vologda by the Russian government. His wife and son followed him into exile. In 1865 Conrad's mother died and his father sent him back to the Ukraine to stay with his maternal uncle (who is spoken of with such affectionate regard in *Some Reminiscences*), where he remained for five years. That was the happiest period of Conrad's childhood—this home-life of the country consciously enjoyed and revelled in. Conrad's first recollection of public matters was the liberation of the serfs, on the



committee of which his uncle was one of the leading spirits. In 1869 Conrad's father was freed on the ground that he was too ill to be dangerous any longer. He carried off his son to Cracow, the old Polish capital, and died there in 1870. Conrad was sent to the gymnasium of St Anne, the foremost public school of the city. There he came under the care of a tutor who influenced him profoundly and who, according to *Some Reminiscences*, was a man of remarkable intuition. He was put forward by the relations to counteract Conrad's strange and inborn desire for a sea-life, but after some earnest and futile talks he realised that his efforts would be useless and ceased to trouble the boy. Conrad's decision was, indeed, final. Brought up in a country without a coast, in a society where he saw no English (though he knew some of the finest English literature from translations by his father), he had yet resolved that he would be an English seaman of the merchant service. And against all obstacles he carried out his plan. It was in 1874 that he went to sea. Marseilles was his "jumping-off ground," but it was some years before he was able to sail under the Red Ensign. For it was not till three years later that he set foot in England. Before that he had some adventures in the Mediterranean and had twice been to the West Indies. He calls this his wild oats sowing period. In May 1878 he landed at Lowestoft and first touched English soil. At that time he did not know a word of English, but he learnt it rapidly, being helped in a general sense to some extent, by a local boat-builder who understood French. For five months he was on board a Lowestoft coaster, *The Skimmer of the Seas*, that traded between that port and Newcastle. In October 1878 he joined the *Duke of Sutherland*, bound for Australia, as ordinary seaman. (Of eighteen

men before the mast all were English save Conrad, a Norwegian, two Americans, and a St Kitts negro called James Wait—a name used just twenty years later for the negro in *The Nigger of the "Narcissus."*)

From now onwards till 1894, when he finally left the sea, Conrad's life was the usual life of a deep-water seaman. He passed for second mate in 1879 and became a Master in the English Merchant Service in the year of his naturalisation in 1884. In 1890 and again in 1894 (the year before his uncle's death) he revisited the Ukraine. But I need not continue such details. I have only a short space at my disposal and, that being so, I think I cannot give a better glimpse of Conrad's existence during all these years than by jotting down, in order, a rough list of the ships he served in, either as officer or in command, from 1880 till 1894. This is a list I scribbled from Conrad's dictation, and against each name he has added the titles of those stories of his which the different ships suggest. Of course this must be taken for what it is worth—a single episode, perhaps only a single name, in a story may be associated with a certain ship, or, on the other hand, the whole story may be strongly autobiographical and reminiscent. And then, again, different memories are sometimes welded together into one story. In *Chance*, for instance, there is an episode connected with the *Riversdale* and another connected with the *Torrens*. However, here is the list: I give the ships, and then, in brackets, I give the stories they individually call up in Conrad's mind.

<i>Loch-Etive</i> .	. ( <i>The Mirror of the Sea</i> ).
<i>Palestine</i> .	. ("Youth").
<i>Riversdale</i> .	. ( <i>The Mirror of the Sea</i> ; <i>Chance</i> ).

- Narcissus* . . . (*The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*; *The Mirror of the Sea*).
- S.S. *John P. Best* . . . ("Typhoon").
- Tilkhurst* . . . (*The Mirror of the Sea*).
- Falconhurst* . . . (*The Mirror of the Sea*).
- Highland Forest* . . . (*The Mirror of the Sea*).
- S.S. *Vidar* . . . (All the Malay books; "Typhoon"; *Some Reminiscences*).
- Otago* . . . ("Falk"; 'Twixt *Land and Sea*; *The Mirror of the Sea*; *Some Reminiscences*).
- S.S. *Roi de Belges* . . . ("An Outpost of Progress"; "Heart of Darkness").
- Torrens* . . . (*Chance*; *The Mirror of the Sea*; *Some Reminiscences*).
- S.S. *Adowa* . . . (*Some Reminiscences*).

In 1894, as I say, Conrad finally left the sea. He had never fully recovered from a severe fever that had invalidated him from the Congo and his health was now more or less broken. He did not know what to do with himself (he had still some idea of going to sea again), but, almost as an afterthought, he sent in to Fisher Unwin the novel which he had begun about 1889 and which he had completed in odd moments—the novel of *Almayer's Folly*. After waiting for three or four months he heard, to his intense surprise, that it was accepted (Edward Garnett, as reader, was responsible) and from henceforward his life is mainly the history of his books, and does not concern us. I will just add that he married in 1896 and has since lived mostly in Kent where he still resides. The turmoil of a creator's existence has no outward adventure save the merit



and reception of his creations, and in that (amongst other things) it differs from the wild and vigorous life of the sea. For long Conrad was only the novelist of a small following (it was a landmark in his career when Henley accepted *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* for *The New Review* in 1897), but, as everyone knows, that following has widened and widened till it now represents the whole intellectual world.

So here I will close my short biography of Joseph Conrad, merely remarking that what I do give is accurate and may serve to straighten out the tangle for future writers. For a mist gathers about famous men's lives just as surely as it gathers about their achievements. Here, in these few pages are all the essential facts up to a period beyond which it would be impertinent to inquire. And now let me speak of his autobiographical works, *The Mirror of the Sea* and *Some Reminiscences*.

Of Conrad's two books of memories and impressions, *The Mirror of the Sea* (1906) is the first. It may be described as a sort of prose-poem about the sea, and a poem founded not alone upon flights of imagery but upon profound realism and knowledge of detail. Its basis of personal reminiscence expands in the rare qualities of poetry and romance. *The Mirror of the Sea* is the most eloquent of all Conrad's books. It has something of the grave and exalted eloquence of *Paradise Lost*, but there is in it, too, a passion of affection and regret very different from the spirit in which Milton wrote. In a sense *The Mirror of the Sea* is Conrad's most intimate and revealing book, because the sea is the one thing about which his enthusiasm is for ever undimmed by his pessimistic philosophy. Sentiment rather than reason is the ruling spirit of *The Mirror of the Sea*. In this work of romance and sea-wisdom,

of hard fact and of warm colour, of the chance recollections of old adventure and association is enshrined the true allegiance of a life-time. Its high and glowing eloquence is an offering to the deep, charmed waters. For the sea has been the most powerful, the most urgent influence in Conrad's life. It has tinged his art with the brilliance, with the sombre glory of its moods, it has fired his imagination with its fickle repose and mighty upheavals. And Conrad's chief faith in humanity seems to have arisen from contact with the sea. Let me explain my meaning in his own words :—

Having matured in the surroundings and under the special conditions of sea-life, I have a special piety towards that form of my past ; for its impressions were vivid, its appeal direct, its demands such as could be responded to with the natural elation of youth and strength equal to the call. There was nothing in them to perplex a young conscience. Having broken away from my origins under a storm of blame from every quarter which had the merest shadow of right to voice an opinion, removed by great distances from such natural affections as were still left to me, and even estranged, in a measure, from them by the totally unintelligible character of the life which had seduced me so mysteriously from my allegiance, I may safely say that through the blind force of circumstances the sea was to be all my world and the merchant service my only home for a long succession of years. No wonder then that in my two exclusively sea books, *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* and *The Mirror of the Sea* (and in the few short sea stories like *Youth* and *Typhoon*), I have tried with an almost filial regard to render the vibration of life in the great world of waters, in the hearts of the simple men who have for ages traversed its solitudes, and also that something sentient which seems to dwell in ships—the creatures of their hands and the objects of their care. (*Some Reminiscences*, pp. 12-3.)

These, surely, are the words of a supreme devotion.

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The scheme of *The Mirror of the Sea*, apparently simple, is in fact subtle with the cross-currents of fact and fancy and with Conrad's strange and misleading method of narration. In its two realms it might almost remind one of Lewis Carroll's *Sylvie and Bruno*—though in *The Mirror of the Sea*, the two realms are but two aspects of the same underlying emotion—the emotion of fidelity and love. The book deals with the sea in all its shades of storm and calm, in its historical and mystical significance, and in its influence upon the unsophisticated hearts of seamen. Long conversations intersperse with visions and recollection of strange or familiar waters. There are chapters on landfalls and departures, on Conrad's own experiences on board the smuggling balancelle *Tremolino* in the Mediterranean (a curious and fascinating chapter about his early days at sea), on Nelson and the spirit he inculcated, and on many another topic of the sea. And throughout the book the language is beautiful with the soft cadence, with the music, with the reserve force of the ocean itself. Let me give three short passages to represent the tone of the whole work :—

Nobody ever comes back from a "missing" ship to tell how hard was the death of the craft, and how sudden and overwhelming the last anguish of her men. Nobody can say with what thoughts, with what regrets, with what words on their lips they died. But there is something fine in the sudden passing away of these hearts from the extremity of struggle and stress and tremendous uproar—from the vast, unrestful rage of the surface to the profound peace of the depths, sleeping untroubled since the beginning of ages. (*The Mirror of the Sea*, p. 94.)

For a moment the succession of silky undulations ran on innocently. I saw each of them swell up the misty line of the horizon, far, far away beyond the derelict brig, and the

next moment, with a slight friendly toss of our boat, it had passed under us and was gone. The lulling cadence of the rise and fall, the invariable gentleness of this irresistible force, the great charm of the deep waters, warmed my breast deliciously, like the subtle poison of a love-potion. But all this lasted only a few soothing seconds before I jumped up too, making the boat roll like the veriest land-lubber. (*The Mirror of the Sea*, p. 227.)

Like a subtle and mysterious elixir poured into the perishable clay of successive generations, it grows in truth, splendour, and potency with the march of ages. In its incorruptible flow all round the globe of the earth it preserves from the decay and forgetfulness of death the greatness of our great men, and amongst them the passionate and gentle greatness of Nelson, the nature of whose genius was, on the faith of a brave seaman and distinguished Admiral, such as to "Exalt the glory of our nation." (*The Mirror of the Sea*, p. 306.)

*Some Reminiscences* (1912) followed six years later. This is more eminently a genuine work of autobiography than is *The Mirror of the Sea*, but even so it will mislead a great many people who go to it for facts. For it is as much the story of Mr Nicholas B.'s life and of his uncle's life as of Conrad's own; and even of himself it talks with but fragmentary voice, leaving him, so to speak, upon the threshold of his first voyage. Certainly there are glimpses of the later Conrad, of him as ship's officer, for instance, and even of him as a guest at his uncle's Polish house in later years, but they flash upon the page only to tantalise. For the artistically erratic and reminiscent form of biography can be seen in this book in its absolute perfection. You catch sight of some new fact almost as Macbeth caught a sight of the dagger.

An exaggeration, of course, but let it pass. For

*Some Reminiscences* was not meant to be a mine of facts. No, it was conceived in something of the same mood as was *The Mirror of the Sea*—not exactly in that mood of lyrical exultation, but in a mood of casual, sweet, and drawn-out remembrance. It is a book of childhood, stirred with the first ripples of a lasting passion—the passion of the sea—and overlaid with the adventurous and pensive recollections of a man. Its whole formation points to a mood of lingering memory. Indeed, it is in that, especially, that it resembles *The Mirror of the Sea*. Of course, there is a great artistic *finesse* hidden in this air of casual browsing. Both of these books present Conrad's literary skill at its nicest balance. Their parts are fitted together with the precision and delicacy of a complicated puzzle. But we should realise that the art is at least as much moulded to the mood as the mood is conjured up for the benefit of the art. For these are the works of a true artist, of an artist whose mind and technique would be averse to the obvious form of bald biographical statement. Besides, Conrad's purpose in them is rather to create an atmosphere than to satisfy curiosity. The real artist is reticent about himself, for impersonality is rooted in his whole idea of art. Indeed, he cannot reveal himself save through the medium of his work.

*Some Reminiscences* contains much of Conrad's most finished prose. Less eloquent than *The Mirror of the Sea*, it is more urbane and more closely knit. His descriptions of people such as his uncle, his tutor, and the original of Almayer, are telling in the accuracy and detail of the portraits, and the whole book is enlivened by the firm lightness of his touch. Moreover, it contains passages of exceptional splendour. I will quote but one, the last in the book, the description



of how Conrad first saw, outside the harbour of Marseilles, the Red Ensign floating from the mast of an English ship. It is most beautiful :—

Her head swung a little to the west, pointing towards the miniature lighthouse of the Joliette breakwater, far away there, hardly distinguishable against the land. The dinghy danced a squashy, splashy jig in the wash of the wake and turning in my seat I followed the *James Westoll* with my eyes. Before she had gone in a quarter of a mile she hoisted her flag as the harbour regulations prescribe for arriving and departing ships. I saw it suddenly flicker and stream out on the flagstaff. The Red Ensign ! In the pellucid, colourless atmosphere bathing the drab and grey masses of that southern land, the livid islets, the sea of pale glassy blue under the pale glassy sky of that cold sunrise, it was as far as the eye could reach the only spot of ardent colour—flame-like, intense, and presently as minute as the tiny red spark the concentrated reflection of a great fire kindles in the clear heart of a globe of crystal. The Red Ensign—the symbolic, protecting warm bit of bunting flung wide upon the seas, and destined for so many years to be the only roof over my head. (*Some Reminiscences*, p. 236-7.)

These two books are Conrad's only direct contributions to the history of his autobiography. And, as I said before, they are not strictly autobiographical at all. To create the atmosphere of youth and of the sea, to summon up the illusions of a vanished time, to pay a debt of gratitude and love, these appear to be the mainsprings of their energy and enthusiasm. The best phases of Conrad's manner can be studied in them to perfection. For the romantic imagery of *The Mirror of the Sea* is as typical of the earlier Conrad as the faint and rounded irony of *Some Reminiscences* is typical of the later Conrad. They are as surely his testament as are the *Confessions* the testament of Rousseau. But what a gulf of difference separates

the two men! For it is in such things, above all, that the secret character reveals itself. Who, for instance, would not respect Evelyn more than Pepys, and like Pepys more than Evelyn? And Conrad, in his two books of memories, stands before us in the clear light of day. He may tell us little about himself in one way, in the material way, but in another he tells us much. To read these books sympathetically is to understand Conrad's attitude towards life and art. His works should never again be mysterious to us, as the works of the few men of real temperamental genius are so apt to be. No, these two books of Conrad's are the true "open sesame" to his novels and stories. In the complete rectitude and sincerity of his art he never allows imagination to rob him for more than a moment of his hold upon the earth.

Indeed, as I said before, many of his stories are actually founded upon incidents of his own career. That is partly why they possess, against their romantic background, such an air of invincible reality. They are the products of an enormously active and dramatic memory, a memory whose main outline is filled in and amplified by a very sure artistic grasp. Conrad's philosophy and romance may colour all his work but they never distort it. For they only exist to the point of making his realism more dramatic. His own reminiscences are the foundation of his stories—sometimes obviously, sometimes so subtly that no exact relationship could be established. For I think one does feel that almost all the characters in Conrad, and a great proportion of the events, have definite prototypes—if it be only in embryo. And the more one studies these two autobiographical books the more one feels this. For he shows us admittedly real people, admittedly real incidents precisely as he shows us the

people and incidents of imagination. His is the art, which, at its best, conceals the effort in the consummate ease and realism of his manner. And, consequently, in the two books where he is recounting actual adventures there is neither a greater nor a lesser air of reality than in his stories and novels. For the realism of the former is toned down by art and the art of the latter is saturated with realism.

I cannot end this chapter without commenting on the astonishing series of events that led a Polish boy to enter the British Merchant Service, and a master mariner to become a novelist. It seems quite incomprehensible—one of these marvellous “flukes” that fate keeps up its sleeve for a hundred years and then flings in our face. I will not enlarge: it is more astounding as a mere fact than any embroidery could make it. It is, indeed, strangely appropriate that the man who has led one of the most wandering and one of the hardest lives of our time should have written the most realistically-romantic novels of our age.



## CHAPTER III

### CONRAD'S NOVELS AND STORIES

LET me say at once that this chapter, like the previous one, is of small critical importance and will not interest real students of Conrad. They are advised not to read it. It is, as it were, spade-work—rather dull but of a certain value. For I think it best, before starting upon a reasoned examination of Conrad's art, to give a short summary of all his published novels and stories. (I say "published," because Mr Conrad has completed another novel of the East which has not yet appeared, and also because there are about half a dozen short stories of his which have been issued serially but have not as yet been gathered into a volume. But there is nothing to be gained from criticising work that cannot easily be consulted.) So that this chapter must be considered more explanatory than critical. And yet even in my summaries I present the spirit rather than the story—they are not complete, they only suggest the salient ideas. Conrad's books are not sufficiently well known for one to assume a general knowledge of them in every reader, and as I shall constantly have to refer to them it does seem wiser to have them definitely and concisely before our eyes once and for all. Of course an objection may well be raised to the method of this book as a whole; and, in the ordinary course, I agree that a more valuable study might be produced by devoting a separate chapter to each one of Conrad's books rather than by dwelling

on the distinct phases of his work. No one can see more clearly than I do the danger of discussing an author's qualities in any other way but as part of a criticism of individual books—the books not being a mere casket containing various mental attributes but themselves the living body—but I have decided on the course I have because I want to prove certain things about Conrad which will pave the road to a more minute study of his books. I do not lose sight of the fact that, though individual excellencies may make a novelist remarkable, it is only by the continuity of the completed structure that he can be judged as an artist—I do not lose sight of that fact either in theory or in practice. For this book is not a mere introduction to Conrad, though, being a pioneer book, I have had to lay emphasis on things that in future may be taken for granted and to treat his work, consequently, in a manner that is not the ideally critical one. Some day Conrad may have a critic who will build up a vast edifice from the subtle dissection of a few novels; but for me it is enough to prove that he is a writer worthy of such a critic.

This, therefore, must be my excuse for the arrangement of the whole book and for the drawn-out simplicity of this special chapter.

Up to the present Conrad has published ten novels (two of them in collaboration with Ford Madox Hueffer) and five volumes of stories. I will examine his own novels to begin with.

His first book is *Almayer's Folly* (1895). This "story of an Eastern River" is one of illusion, weariness, and irresistible passion. Almayer is the white trader, the only white trader, of Sambir, a distant and obscure

settlement up the river Pantai of an island in the Dutch East Indies. He has been there many, many years, first with high hope, with much business, and under the protection of powerful Captain Lingard, the famous and dreaded "Rajah Laut," but latterly with nothing left to him but his love for his half-caste daughter Nina and his belief in a vast treasure waiting for him in the interior. For Captain Lingard has disappeared for ever, ruined and broken, and the wily Abdulla, the Arab treacherously introduced so long ago by Willems (see *An Outcast of the Islands*), has sapped the very life of his trade. A heretic amongst the True Believers, the once-influential Almayer passes a despised and perilous existence beside the steaming waters of the Pantai. Everything around him has sunk into decay before his brooding and embittered sight, but at last hope, in the form of Dain Maroola, a Malay of noble family, has come to him with the promise of wealth. For it is with Dain the great expedition into the interior is to be made. And with the gold he and Nina will escape from their prison to Europe, and all the misery of the past will be blotted out. But in these visions of a splendid future Almayer is blind to the present, and even as he dreams of perfect felicity, Dain, the conspirator, has stolen away the heart of Nina. And far from that forlorn and hopeless spot she flies with him across the sea, the mysterious and untamed Nina, to the house of his father, the Rajah. But Almayer, weakly violent and affectionate by turns, sinks under the double blow of calamity and disappointment.

There is a secret air of plotting in this book, the plotting of the local Rajah, Lakamba, and his councillor, the one-eyed and pessimistic Babalatchi, the plotting of Almayer and Dain, of Dain and the Rajah, of Dain

and Nina, of Babalatchi and Mrs Almayer, of Abdulla and the Dutch, and, as it were, the patient and sombre plotting of the forces of nature. For the stifling, moist, and foetid smell of the jungle fills the book with a whispered tension. The poisonous breath of the river and of the rotting forests seems to have entered into the hearts of all these actors, and there is positive relief in the thought of Almayer's death. *Almayer's Folly* is not one of Conrad's easiest stories to read. Its monotonous and oppressive atmosphere has an almost physical effect upon the nerves. But it is an imposing effort of its kind, this sinister revelation of a tropical backwater.

Conrad's next book is *An Outcast of the Islands* (1896). This is another tragic story of Sambir and the Pantai, and it would have been almost better to consider it before *Almayer's Folly* because it treats of a date fifteen to twenty years anterior to that novel. In *An Outcast of the Islands* Almayer is still young and Nina a tiny child. Captain Lingard is still in his full vigour, there is still activity on the wharf of Lingard and Co., and the influence of Abdulla is but a shadow. And, indeed, all might have remained well but for the cursed Willems, Hudig's defaulting clerk from Macassar. It was Captain Lingard, autocratic and indulgent, who had given Willems his first start in life, and it was Captain Lingard who bore him off to the safe retreat of Sambir when the outraged Hudig thrust him forth with curses. From the outset Willems and Almayer hate one another. It is a thing the likelihood of which Captain Lingard should have guessed. When he sailed down the river, leaving the two men together in the treacherous solitude of the forest, he might have known that disaster would

follow. But he knew only that his will was law and that he, the benevolent despot, was doing everything for the best. Willems, idle and bored to death, meets in his forest walks the enchanting Aïssa, daughter of the old sea-pirate who lives under Lakamba's protection. They love with the swift and passionate abandon of the East. And it is in the slavish infatuation of this white man that the one-eyed Babalatchi grasps an opening for his eternal sense of intrigue. Aïssa is taken secretly from Willems, and in the madness of his raving he is told that only under one condition will he ever see her again—on the condition of piloting Abdulla's ship from the river's mouth to the settlement. Abdulla is rich, he is unscrupulous, and once he is in Sambir the power of Lingard, the dreaded "Rajah Laut," will cease. The infatuated Willems, a megalomaniac and a man without conscience, commits this baseness; and the rich preserve of the white captain, his benefactor, is filched from him for ever.

The latter part of the story consists of Captain Lingard's punishment of Willems. He returns to the settlement and he finds out all from the indignant Almayer. On his boat he had actually brought with him Willem's wife and child and he came back full of plans and good thoughts for his *protégé*. But his revenge is terrible enough. He sentences Willems to perpetual imprisonment in a dark clearing of the Pantai. Before him the river, behind him and on both sides the impenetrable jungle. Willem's love for Aïssa has turned to loathing and he seeks desperately to escape. But at the moment of his flight (made possible—in appearance—by the treachery of Almayer), she shoots him with his own revolver.



The story of *An Outcast of the Islands* is one of violent emotion soon spent—like a tropical downpour. There is scheming in it, hatred, and passion. The action is, I consider, too long drawn out, but the situation is impressive and even terrible. As in *Almayer's Folly* the teeming, patient, and silent life of the wilds weighs upon every person and thing, colouring the whole aspect of nature not only in a material but in a spiritual sense. *An Outcast of the Island* reeks of the dank undergrowth.

*The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* (1898) is Conrad's third novel. It is the story of one voyage of the sailing-ship *Narcissus* from Bombay to London—a story dealing with calms and with storms, with mutiny on the high seas, with bravery and with cowardice, with tumultuous life, and with death, the releaser from toil. "The nigger of the *Narcissus*" is James Wait, a huge St Kitts negro, who is dying from consumption but who clings to existence with scorn, with terror, and with evil words. His sinking life hangs like a mill-stone round the hearts of the sailors. Only Donkin, the Cockney, who pilfers from the dying man, feels in his dirty little soul no touch of compassion.

It is, in fact, the nigger who is the centre figure of the book. From the moment he steps aboard at Bombay till the moment his dead body is lowered into the northern sea he dominates the whole life of the ship. The wastrel Donkin is cunning enough to use him and his illness as a lever for stirring up unrest in the hearts of the crew. They admire their officers but they cannot understand their attitude towards the dying man. And bewilderment to simple men is the first step in disorganisation. But the individual human interest is incidental to the real purpose of

the story, which is to conjure up the actual spirit of a voyage, to make it live again before our very eyes. This book is realistic in the finest sense, alike in its atmosphere and its characterisation. We can almost smell the ocean, almost feel the ship moving beneath our feet, almost sense the tropical heat and the winter cold. And it is the same when we come to look at the men. The pictures of the three officers, and of such men as Singleton, "a sixty-year-old child of the mysterious sea," of Podmore the cook, of Craig (known commonly as "Belfast"), of Wait the nigger, and of the despised (and influential) Donkin, are extraordinarily defined and brilliant.

It is impossible to say much about *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* because it is still more a novel without a plot than *Vanity Fair* is a novel without a hero. And yet it is one of Conrad's most original conceptions. He alone has ever written such a book. It has the vividness of an actual experience touched by the magic glitter of remembrance. The descriptions of the sea and of the life on board are strangely beautiful. *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* has the qualities of an epic—an epic of the arduous, the exacting, and the enslaving service of the sea.

*Lord Jim* (1900) is Conrad's next novel. It is a story of remorse and of the effort to regain self-respect for a deed of fatal and unexpected cowardice. The sea and secluded Eastern settlements are the background. "Lord Jim," son of a clergyman, and a young man of romantic imagination, faith in himself, and an almost morbid sensibility, is an officer on the pilgrimage *Patna*, a "steamer as old as the hills, lean like a greyhound, and eaten up with rust worse than a condemned water-tank." On a calm night in the Red

Sea, while Jim on the bridge, lulled into a sense of delicious and perfect security, is awaiting the end of his watch, the *Patna* passes over a derelict. To a boat in her condition such a thing would have been fatal ninety-nine times out of a hundred. Not one of the eight hundred sleeping pilgrims realises what has happened, but immediately a subdued, hideous panic breaks out on the upper deck amongst the few white officers and engineers. Jim, disdainful of their terror, watches in scornful silence while they lower a boat with feverish haste. At any instant the bulkheads may give (Jim himself has made an examination and has seen the plates bulging inwards)—and there are no boats for the pilgrims. He watches with utter disgust the secret fury of their terror, and suddenly, when the boat is already in the water, he jumps. He had not meant to do so, he was sure of himself, but at the crisis—he jumps. And it is this lapse for which all the rest of his life has to atone. For public disgrace follows quick upon their action. By some unaccountable fortune the *Patna* succeeds in keeping afloat, and is towed into Suez by a French man-of-war—a ship deserted by her officers. So the more or less plausible story invented by the captain, who knew that dead men tell no tales, turns upon them to rend them for good and all.

It is at the court of inquiry that Marlow, the narrator of the tale, makes Jim's acquaintance. He is attracted to him against his will, and in all Jim's subsequent wanderings he takes some active or passive participation. And Jim's wanderings are many and strange, for they are, indeed, the wanderings of an uneasy spirit. Everywhere he is dogged by some evidence, some reminiscence of that one act, and he flees from spot to spot, throwing up good and permanent billets



at the breath of suspicion. For he is the slave of an idea—the idea of rehabilitation. And at last, in far Patusan, as adviser and virtual ruler of a savage and trusting people, he gains all the peace of mind that he is ever likely to know. In the sun of this colossal triumph the shadow of his failure is hardly discernible. Marlow visits him in this distant corner of the East and finds him crowned with the prestige of an immense and invariable success. And yet the final mishap of his life is lying ready at hand. Certain marauders, a mongrel crew of pirates, penetrate to his settlement with bloodthirsty intent. They are surrounded, cut off from supplies, and could have been killed to a man, but on Jim's advice they are allowed to depart in peace to their ship at the mouth of the river. They go and Patusan rejoices. But in their descent, as a last revenge, they murder a body of resting warriors commanded by the son of the chief, Doramin. And in a flash the power of Jim's reputation, of his unbounded prestige, crumbles into dust; and from being revered almost as a god he is execrated almost as a devil. But in this material disaster he grasps the chance of a final spiritual rehabilitation. With unflinching and cruel courage (he leaves to her despair the girl he loves) he crosses the river to old Doramin, and allows him to shoot him dead. So he atones to himself for the lost rectitude of bygone years. "And that is the end. He passes away under a cloud, inscrutable at heart, forgotten, unforgiven, and excessively romantic."

There can be little doubt that Conrad's fame as a novelist rests chiefly upon *Lord Jim*. And perhaps the main reason for this is that it raises a fierce moral issue in a very definite form and carries it through on a high level of creative intensity. But it would, I think, have been even more powerful had it been told

as a plain narrative rather than as a story recounted at second-hand. This is so partly because it would have conveyed still greater conviction, and partly because one is apt to get weary of viewing everything through the eyes of Marlow, who is a mixture of the ironic and sentimental philosopher. On the other hand one must admit that it gains something from this detached and organic treatment. We see the whole tragedy with a clearness that would have been impossible had the perspective been eliminated. For Jim, himself, though unusual and romantic, is, to a large extent, inarticulate. Conrad is too wise to make many of his heroes clever men.

The character of Jim, rather than his adventures, is the mainspring of the book, but the story is told throughout with intense realism. Conrad has never written anything more sumptuous than the description of the passage of the pilgrim-ship across the Indian Ocean.

Another curious thing to notice about *Lord Jim* is that it divides itself into two unofficial parts of very unequal length and merit. The first part, which ends with the remarks of the French officer about a third of the way through the book, is much the more perfect and satisfying. The second part reads almost like an after-thought. It introduces, too late in the novel, a new set of characters and it develops, too wearisomely, the philosophic problem of cowardice and its retribution. It is in this second part, especially, that one feels the mistake of telling the story through Marlow. In the first part he does serve a very real purpose, but in the second part he has become an aimless onlooker.

Although, in my opinion, *Lord Jim* is not one of Conrad's greatest novels (its purpose is almost too

didactic—and it is a purpose strained to the uttermost), still it will ever remain one of his most widely known, for it is amongst his strongest, most readable, and most closely argued efforts.

*Nostromo* (1903) is the next novel by Conrad. It is the history of a South American revolution. But on this leading theme there hang such a multitude of side-issues and of individual experiences that it is certainly the hardest of Conrad's novels to summarise. In this story of vast riches, of unbridled passions, of patriotism, of greed, of barbaric cruelty, of the most debased and of the most noble impulses, the whole history of South America seems to be epitomised.

In the republic of Costaguana, one of these hopeless, unsettled South American republics, there is one prosperous and contented province, the sea-board Occidental Province, whose capital Sulaco is the head-quarters of the famous "Gould Concession," owners of the San Tomé silver mine, which has brought wealth and security to the whole district. The head of the concession is an English Costaguano of the third generation, Charles Gould—a taciturn man, hiding in his silence an inherited love of order and hatred of political unrest that make of him a formidable type of fanatic—the cold and reasonable type. His wife, the frail and compassionate Doña Emilia, is the most moving figure in the whole of Conrad's books. The slow evaporation of Charles Gould's love for her in his intense absorption in "material interests" is a tragic undercurrent to this story of visible terror and anarchy. For the wealth of Sulaco has attracted, at last, the politicians from beyond the mountains, and all the vilest riff-raff of the republic. In the revolution to upset the humane President-Dictator

Ribiera (the one hope of Costaguana), a wild rush is made for Sulaco both from the mountains and the sea. The whole social fabric, built up with such laborious care, falls to pieces at the breath of disaster. The Sulaco aristocracy, powerless in the hands of a mob who, fickle and cringing to success, welcome the victorious revolutionaries with orgies of disorder and joy, await the ruin of exile or shameful death. But in that gloom and horror is born anew the great idea of the Occidental Republic. It is the idea of the young Decoud, a mocker and a journalist, whose patriotic ardour appears more amatory than disinterested and who despises the evil fortune that has brought him home from the gaiety of his Parisian life. His plan, put shortly, is for the Occidental Province to cut itself off from the rest of Costaguana and become the Occidental Republic. And, in fact, that is what takes place. For at the height of the terror, when Charles Gould and others are expecting instant death (Gould has absolutely refused to play into the hands of the revolutionaries), General Barrios, one of the incorruptibles of the Ribiera *régime*, returns with his army and drives off the invaders.

But I have not yet mentioned Nostromo himself, the man after whom the book is named. He is an Italian who has come to Sulaco on a sailing-vessel and has worked his way up to be Capataz de Cargadores—the most reliable, the most useful, and the most feared man in Sulaco. (His very nickname of “Nostromo” gives the measure of his success.) He is a person of almost boundless vanity and resource, and the revelation of his curious, complex character makes, as it were, one of the discreet foundations of the book. For he is a man suffering from a grievance which he never reveals—a grievance against society

that takes too much for granted, that cheats him of his reward, that cannot adequately recognise all that he has done for it. On the night before the invasion of Sulaco he is told off to remove the silver treasure out to sea. This vogue of his, with Decoud who is fleeing for his life, is one of the wonderful things in Conrad. He hides the treasure, indeed, hides it safely and deep in a desert island of the Placid Gulf, but he never reveals its resting-place to mortal ears. For with Decoud's death and the sinking of the lighter the treasure is supposed to be lost for ever at the bottom of the sea. And Nostromo, not so much out of greed as out of pique, keeps the secret in his breast and grows rich "very slowly," visiting the island at night to extract an occasional bar of the incorruptible metal. And it is there he meets his death by a tragic misunderstanding. For on the lonely Isabel a lighthouse has been erected now and it is guarded by old Giorgio Viola, a Garibaldino veteran, and his two daughters, the dark Linda and the fair Gizelle. To Linda Nostromo is betrothed, but it is Gizelle that he loves. The Garibaldino, knowing nothing of the treasure or of his other secret, shoots him as he skulks below, thinking he is some wastrel, philandering fellow come on shore to meet his daughter Gizelle.

I have done no more than just touch upon the outskirts of this extraordinary work. For it is a book containing so many threads of interest and so many individualities of the first order that to condense it with any realism is impossible. And how is one to recreate the romance of atmosphere? To read *Nostromo* is like drinking from a cold spring on the mountain side—it thrills you to the very marrow of your bones with a gulp of breathless and exhilarating



life. *Nostromo* is Conrad's longest novel, and in my opinion, it is by far his greatest. It is a book singularly little known and one which many people find a difficulty in reading (probably owing to the confused way in which time is indicated), but it is one of the most astounding *tours de force* in all literature. For sheer creative genius it overtops all Conrad's work. Its manner of narration is, perhaps, involved, but its intricacy is highly artistic, and the continuity of the whole is convincing. In dramatic vigour, in psychological subtlety, and in the sustained feeling of a mood (an atmosphere at once physical and mental) *Nostromo* is a phenomenal masterpiece. It is Conrad's genius incarnate.

In contrast to *Nostromo*, *The Secret Agent* (1907) is a comparatively simple book. It is a novel treating of the underworld of London life—the underworld of anarchists and spies. Verloc, “the secret agent,” is ostensibly an anarchist, but in reality a spy of one of the big Embassies. He keeps a dim, disreputable shop in a side street of Soho, where he lives with his wife, Winnie, his wife's mother, and his half-witted brother-in-law, Stevie. Verloc in his heavy and slothful way is a domesticated man and well pleased with his comfortable existence. So that he is horribly upset when he gets a broad hint from the Embassy that he is not doing enough for his money. Either he must make himself felt or he will be sacked. Mr Vladimir is very explicit. In the days of the late Baron Stott-Wartenheim it was easy, he admits, to impose upon the Embassy, but now what they want are concrete proofs. Verloc must stir up public opinion against the anarchists—he must engineer a plot that will drive the police into drastic action.

And it is with such words ringing in his ears that Verloc slowly returns home. For a month he broods in silence, miserably torn from side to side, plunged in bitter thoughts. But at last, in his cloudy and secretive mind, he evolves a plan. He plays upon the feelings of the merciful Stevie till he has worked that simple-minded youth into a speechless fury of pity for the wrongs of mankind. And he suggests to him the remedy—the blowing up of Greenwich Observatory. Stevie, in the singleness of his heart, accepts every idea of Verloc's because he has always been brought up to believe that Mr Verloc is *good*. He is the willing and exultant victim of the cause of humanity. So far, all right—the only hitch to Verloc's plan is that Stevie, stumbling in the fog, gets blown up by his own bomb.

Winnie Verloc, whose whole life, to the very fact of marrying the comfortably situated Verloc, is one long sacrifice for her beloved Stevie, knows nothing of all this plotting. She only knows that Stevie is in the country with Michaelis, an ex-convict and convinced humanitarian, for a few days of fresh air. She guesses nothing, but wonders vaguely at Verloc's curious air of depression. Even on the day of the explosion, not having seen an evening paper, she is completely ignorant of the very fact, till she is enlightened by a detective who had found amidst the shattered fragments of the body a tape with Stevie's name and address on it (the handiwork of his sister's ceaseless and tender forethought). Then, indeed, she realises all.

The last part of the book is very dreadful. When the detective has left she remains motionless in the twilight of the shop. Verloc enters. She trembles and remains still. And all the while the reserve of



long years is slipping off her, and hatred and despair have filled her heart. All her violent maternal love for Stevie, all her outraged and defeated love, keep her, with their conflicting emotions, as composed as a woman of stone. But suddenly, in a moment of animal revenge, she seizes a knife and stabs Verloc to the heart. In the reaction of terror she staggers from the shop only to meet Comrade Ossipon, the swaggering and irresistible anarchist from whom she has always shrunk. Now, in her misery, she flings herself upon him, telling him all, and beseeching him to fly with her and protect her. Sick with fear and greed (he wants Verloc's savings) he promises; but on the platform of Waterloo Station, when the train is moving, he jumps out and leaves her to her fate. That night she drowns herself in mid-channel.

*The Secret Agent* is a great book but it suffers, to some extent, from the improbability of its plot. It is founded, obviously, on the notorious explosion in Greenwich Park of twenty years ago, but in his imaginative effort to build a story around this episode Conrad has fallen into rather the same error that Meredith fell into in *Diana of the Crossways*. Meredith did not quite succeed in making Diana's betrayal of Dacier's secret credible, although it is simply the story of Mrs Norton and *The Times*, and Conrad does not quite succeed in making his explanation of the Greenwich explosion credible—although there must be some explanation. But though the main idea of the *Secret Agent* is far-fetched, its atmosphere and its characters are in his finest manner. Winnie and Stevie are people of the highest and most touching reality, and Verloc himself, the anarchist called "The Professor," Ossipon, and Winnie's mother, are indeed admirable. The secret air of the shop is produced with

fidelity, and the whole tone of the book is strangely authentic.

Put briefly, the plot of *Under Western Eyes* (1911) is as follows. One night the student Razumov, a silent, solitary, and ambitious man, returns home to his lodging in a poor quarter of St Petersburg to discover, awaiting him there, another student called Haldin. This Haldin is a revolutionary of an extreme type who has that very morning assassinated an official with a bomb. As yet undiscovered, he has fled to Razumov for help. It is true that they have never spoken together of revolutionary matters, but he has conceived an exalted opinion of him on account of his reserved and austere character. Haldin's recital and request for help stagger and infuriate Razumov, not only because he considers him a criminal but because he realises the grave jeopardy into which his own future is thrown should this meeting ever be guessed at. He has always had a hatred of visionaries, and his secret aim is to attain distinction in the government service. Being sent out by Haldin to arrange for his escape, he ends up, after a futile effort to do so, by denouncing him to the police. This midnight betrayal, while Haldin reposes trustfully in his bed, is the most tremendous thing in the book. And the only result of it all is that Razumov becomes convinced that he, himself, is suspected by the police. In a scene between him and Councillor Mikulin, who has charge of the enquiry, he endeavours to probe their intention concerning him. But Councillor Mikulin is not to be easily drawn. And caught thus in the web of suspicion, Razumov consents to go as a government spy to Geneva, where there is a large colony of Russian conspirators. Here, as fate would

have it, he meets Haldin's sister, who considers him a hero, as he is supposed to have been her brother's last associate and helper. On all hands, indeed, he is treated warmly, though as something of an enigma ; for he cannot hide the bitterness of his animosity and the gnawing of remorse. They have been fully roused in him by contact with Nathalie Haldin. She is presented as a beautiful and true nature whose trust in Ramuzov is unbounded. Slowly, under the awakening, this life of lies grows impossible to him. But it is not till all chances of his ever being discovered have disappeared, not till he finds that he is falling in love with Nathalie and that his love will be returned, that he resolves to confess. At midnight, in a room full of determined and reckless men, he makes his reparation. He is deafened for ever by having the drums of both his ears broken. Early that same morning, tottering on the road in the perfect silence of the surrounding world, he gets run over by a tramcar and severely hurt. He is tended by a Russian woman, who devotes her life to his misery, and at the close of the book he is living with her in the South of Russia, slowly dying.

The story gets its name from the fact that it is told by an old English teacher of languages in Geneva, partly in his own words and partly from a diary left by Razumov. *Under Western Eyes* is really a one man book, and as such, all other figures are naturally subsidiary to the main one. Razumov, the believer in order and in the calm wisdom of organised reform, stands forth in the hard role of constant opposition. His is the psychology of a man in revolt against revolt. His appeal to one's sympathy lacks sentiment but is poignant all the same. The book is written with great precision and subtlety of language, and marks

a step forward in Conrad's exactitude of style. The description of the winter night of Russia, of the Russian colony in Geneva, and of the sister and mother of Haldin are particularly striking. Personally I do not put *Under Western Eyes* on so lofty a pinnacle as, say, *The Secret Agent* (there is a certain bleakness about it), but I think it is a surer piece of art.

*Chance* (1914) is Conrad's latest novel. As its name implies the irony of chance is the leading link of the whole structure. The story is wanting in conventional plot and, though full of events and characters, concerns, in chief, two people—Flora de Barral, the daughter of a famous (and fraudulent) financier, and Captain Roderick Anthony, son of a poet and master of the *Ferndale*. The book is divided into two parts, named respectively "The Damsel" and "The Knight." The first concerns Flora de Barral's childhood and her miserable youth, and the second concerns Captain Anthony and his life with Flora aboard the *Ferndale*. After the crash which sent de Barral to penal servitude and herself to the horrors of abasing poverty, Miss de Barral's best friends proved to be a Mr and Mrs Fyne, whom she had known slightly in the days of her wealth. It is at their house that she meets Captain Anthony, Mrs Fyne's brother, home from sea on one of his rare visits. And it is in a sudden and overwhelming flash of intuition that Anthony sees into the depths of her forlorn and despairing soul. He carries her off with him by the sheer force of his boundless pity springing into love—thus offending mortally the correct and decorous Mrs Fyne. And it is on board the *Ferndale* that Flora, now Mrs Anthony, brings the ex-convict (and more than ever monomaniac) de Barral. His insane hatred of the Captain, who has

come between his daughter and the brilliant marriage of his dreams, gives a sinister background to the misunderstanding sundering for so long Anthony and his wife. For she believes that his action is founded entirely upon magnanimity—a thing intolerable to her proud and embittered heart—and he believes that to her he is merely the means of freedom for herself and refuge for her father. It is in the crisis of old de Barral's attempt to poison Anthony that the barriers are swept away.

These two people, the young and unhappy girl and the silent and really noble seaman, are drawn with Conrad's minutest and most thrilling insight. Captain Anthony is one of the most affecting characters in all his books—a sort of male counterpart to the Mrs Gould of *Nostromo*. And Flora de Barral is a tragic figure. The story of her youth, of her meeting with Anthony, and of their life on board ship has a quality of distress and pathos that is very powerful. Anthony's treatment of her is touching in the controlled passion of his pity and indignation. And besides Flora de Barral and Captain Anthony, *Chance* contains in the financier de Barral, in Mr and Mrs Fyne, in Powell (second mate of the *Ferndale* and one of the prominent people of the book), in Franklin (first mate of the *Ferndale*), in Flora's detestable governess, and in her manufacturer cousin, an enticing gallery of portraits. The breath of life is in these creations. Marlow, whom Conrad introduces into several of his tales, appears here once again in the guise of narrator—not so much of his own adventures as of other people's.

This strange chronicle of passion and disaster has the reserve and elusive subtlety that are typical of Conrad's later manner—of *Under Western Eyes*, for



instance. The air of romance is secret but in the twilight of these sombre pages one feels the author's immense creative realism. The obscurity of such a book as *Chance* arises from the superabundance of atmosphere—of spiritual as opposed to physical atmosphere. *Chance* is probably the hardest of Conrad's books about which one can make any conclusive judgment. Admirers of his earlier work may consider it almost arid, but that is simply to misunderstand the recent development of Conrad's art. For the truth is that *Chance* is a work of the finest shades and of the highest tension. It is the most finished of all his books.

With *Chance* we come to the end of the novels written solely by Conrad. There still remain to be considered the two novels he wrote in conjunction with Ford Hueffer, but before examining them I will say something about his five volumes of stories.

The first of these is *Tales of Unrest* (1898). There are five stories in this book—"Karain," "The Idiots," "An Outpost of Progress," "The Return," and "The Lagoon." The first of them, "Karain," is a tale of adventure, of revenge, and of ghostly possession. It is recounted in the safe refuge of a schooner riding at anchor in an island bay of an Eastern Archipelago, by the chief of a war-like people. The audience are the young officers of the ship. Karain is a chief of mighty prestige in his tiny and obscure corner of the world but he is tormented by a ghost—by the ghost of Pata Matara, his friend. Pata Matara's sister had married Karain's brother but had left him to live with a white trader, who had taken her away with him when he left their land.

And thereupon Karain and Pata Matara swear vengeance and track them through all the East in a real Odyssey of painful and prolonged wanderings. But in the years of their journeying the vision of Pata Matara's sister has risen before Karain in the guise of perfection, and when at last they find them in the flesh and Pata Matara is about to shoot, Karain, frenzied by the strength of his illusion, shoots Pata Matara and saves the woman's life. And now in the secure and honoured position of his new life he is tormented by the silent presence of his friend.

"The Idiots," is a tale of Northern France. Jean Pierre Bacadou is a rich Breton farmer who loves his land with the deep affection of a French peasant. But by some tragic mischance all his four children prove to be idiots. His rage and despair drive him to the violence of drink and cruelty. He is determined to have an ordinary child who shall inherit his land. But Susan, his wife, dare not chance her malign fate again, and when he attempts to approach her she stabs him. Later, on that wild and stormy night, she flings herself into the sea amidst the rocks. But the poor idiots, in good health and in darkness of soul, survive and flourish.

"An Outpost of Progress" is the story of a trading station in the wilds of Africa. Two white men, Kayerts and Carlier, incompetent and foolish people, are left in the wilderness to take charge of the station for six months. They begin by being friendly and full of trifling activity but gradually the lassitude and unrestraint of the wilds creep over their minds. They realise that their ivory is coming from the sale of slaves, and, though flaming with indignation at first, it is not long before they tacitly acquiesce. Moreover, a secret and growing irritation with one another begins to



blacken their lives. The relief boat is late, they abandon hope, and the station work is neglected. Fever undermines them, and their irritation, long pent up, blazes out suddenly over the question of a few lumps of white sugar. Carlier threatens Kayerts, and Kayerts, in an agony of terror, shoots Carlier dead. Next morning, through the fog, the whistle of the relief steamer is heard. Kayerts, rousing himself from his lethargy, runs out and hangs himself.

"The Return" tells how Alvan Hervey, a rich and conventional city man, arrives home one evening to find a note from his wife saying that she has left him to live with an editor of a paper owned by Alvan Hervey. He has not got over the shock of reading the scrawled lines when his wife reappears—she has found that she has not sufficient moral courage for the step. The mutiny in Hervey's mind fills most of the pages of this, the longest story in *Tales of Unrest*. He decides that all must go on as if nothing had happened, and his wife, cold, hostile, and half-remorseful, agrees. But late at night when she has retired to her room and he is left alone with his thoughts, he finds that this life of deception and uncertainty will be intolerable. He rushes upstairs and bursts into his wife's room. Then, before her icy words and her look of hatred, he flies from the house, banging the door behind him. "He never returned."

"The Lagoon" is another of those stories told to a white man by a native of the East. In the depth of the forest, darkness overtakes the white man and he determines to spend the night in Arsat's clearing. He has known Arsat long ago in a distant country. He finds him in his hut by the side of his dying wife, and through the long watches of the night he listens to the story of Arsat's passion and of his escape

with his beloved. They had fled far from the revenge of a powerful rajah, and with them had fled Arsat's brother. But, alas, the brother had been killed by the enemy and Arsat had not dared to turn back to his rescue. It is a bitter regret to him, now that all his hopes are dissolving in death, and when she is no more he intends to return at last for one final fight. As they talk together the dawn rises over the forest and the lagoon.

The most remarkable story in *Tales of Unrest* is "The Return," which is well seconded by "An Outpost of Progress." The most beautiful is certainly "The Lagoon" (it is particularly interesting from the fact that it is the first short story Conrad ever wrote), while "Karain" is the sunniest, and "The Idiots" the most realistic. These stories suffer from the defects of Conrad's early richness of style—the sonorous splendour of their language and emotion is almost cloying. But "The Return" is decidedly one of the most astonishing stories Conrad has written, and there are lyrical passages in "The Lagoon" of the purest loveliness. *Tales of Unrest* is not a mature book, not so mature as the novels of this period, but it is a book that cannot be ignored by any student of Conrad. Indeed its immaturity is, in my opinion, at least as valuable as some of his more finished work.

*Youth* (1902) comes next in order amongst Conrad's volumes of stories. There are three tales in this book—"Youth," "Heart of Darkness," and "The End of the Tether." "Youth" itself is almost more a reminiscence than a story (see the previous chapter for a discussion of the autobiographical basis of many of Conrad's stories), and almost more a recapture of the emotions and glamour of youth than a reminis-

cence. It is Marlow who tells the story and it is the story of his first voyage to the East, with its countless hardships, with its danger from storm, from fire, and from shipwreck. The indomitable optimism and romance of youth reveal themselves in every line but a vein of profound melancholy runs through this tale of adventure and daring—the melancholy of fond recollection and of unappeasable desire.

“Heart of Darkness” is a sombre story of the dark forests of the Congo and of the darker hearts of men. Once more Marlow is the narrator. He tells us how he got a post as Captain of a Congo steamer and how he went out to Africa and up into the blind interior. Like “Youth,” this, too, reads as a reminiscence and is extraordinarily atmospheric. The Congo rises before us like an ominous and mystic spirit; and Mr Kurtz, the energetic agent of the great Company, whose name is on everyone’s mouth and whose heart has been corrupted by the savage wilderness, is like the embodiment of that lawless and unhappy land. Marlow, on his first arrival, stays at a *depôt* within two hundred miles of the coast, but afterwards he has to take his steamer up to the far outposts of the interior. It is there that the valued agent, Mr Kurtz, lives—that wonderful procurer of ivory and that eloquent exponent of unspeakable rites. Marlow is with him during his last days and has to break the news of his death to the girl who thought him the best and most enlightened of heroes.

It is absurd to call “The End of the Tether” a short story, because it is nearly two hundred pages long. It is about a man whose great love for his daughter is the one thing remaining to him from the disastrous chances of his life. Captain Whalley has been rich, independent, and full of sober joy in

existence—but his wife has died, his daughter, Ivy, has married and settled in Australia, his money has nearly all been lost in a bank smash, and he is getting old. £500 remains to him from the sale of his barque, *Fair Maid*, and this he invests in a share of the *Sofala* an East Indian coasting tramp, of which he becomes Captain. It is only after he has been in her for some time that he realises he is going blind. The *Sofala* is owned by the chief engineer, Mr Massy, who had won the money for her in a lottery and who is now again on the verge of ruin. Captain Whalley has told no one that he is going blind, but Mr Massy has guessed. His is a mean, ferreting, and avaricious nature, and he is as incapable of comprehending the lofty character of his Captain as he is of having an unselfish thought of his own. In the baseness of his heart he plots to make use of Captain Whalley's advancing blindness for his own purposes. If only he can cause him to run the ship aground on the rocks of the point he will get the insurance money! He succeeds in diverting the compass by placing iron bars near it. It is a complete success. But Captain Whalley, groping on the bridge in the sudden complete darkness that has descended upon his eyes in the shock of striking, touches the iron and knows all. And then as he mutters passionately to Massy that he "will get fifteen years for this" the other, choking with spite and fear, whispers back that if he goes to prison for trying to cheat the insurance, Captain Whalley will lose his five hundred pounds. "Captain Whalley did not move. True! Ivy's money! Gone in the wreck. Again he had a flash of insight. He was indeed at the end of his tether." And filling his pocket with the iron bars, he allows himself to sink for ever with his ship.



*Youth* is as famous amongst Conrad's volumes of stories as *Lord Jim* is amongst his novels—and more deservedly so. For it contains in "Youth" the most romantic, in "Heart of Darkness" the most terrible, and in "The End of the Tether" the most pathetic story Conrad has ever written. "Youth," itself, is certainly one of the very finest things in Conrad, a gorgeous dream, a vision of the rare and transient illusion of youth. It is a reminiscence tinged, as I say, with regret and made lyrical by the power of remembrance. "Heart of Darkness," like "The Return," suffers from exaggeration. It is an extremely impressive story but it is almost over-heavy. It is positively too rich. As a creation of atmosphere it is immense, as a work of art it leaves something to be desired. (Conrad has told me that it did not take him more than a month to write. This, considering its length of over 40,000 words, is quite enough to account for its air of haste and its comparative lack of finish.) "The End of the Tether" is a very beautiful and touching story. Captain Whalley, austere, upright, and tenderly thoughtful for his daughter, is one of the most moving of all Conrad's characters. The contrast 'twixt his self-contained and tragic aloofness and the petty spite of the other officers is presented in Conrad's grandest manner.

*Typhoon* (1903) is Conrad's third volume of stories. It is made up of four tales:—"Typhoon," "Amy Foster," "Falk," "To-morrow." The first and longest of these is, as its name implies, the description of a storm—a typhoon in the China Seas. In the very idea of such a story there is little in the way of plot. The steamship *Nan-Shan*, commanded by the dense and stupid Captain MacWhirr,

is taking two hundred Chinese coolies to the treaty port of Fu-Chau when she runs into a typhoon. The story is one gigantic description of the fury of the sea and of the bravery of simple men. Captain MacWhirr, who, in his unimaginative ignorance, disregards all the symptoms of the approaching storm, by the sheer force of his integrity and perseverance emerges triumphant not alone from the typhoon but from the ugly after-position with the two hundred Chinamen who believe that their money has been stolen from them. In the storm itself, his first-mate, the sprightly and talkative Jukes, has seconded him courageously, but in the affair of the coolies his livelier imagination makes him tremble at the probable result. It is Captain MacWhirr who is the victor throughout.

"Amy Foster" is the story of a dull-witted but compassionate English girl who falls in love with a strange man from Eastern Europe. This ignorant, wild, and romantic peasant from the Carpathian Mountains has been cast up by the sea, the only survivor from an emigrant ship bound for America. Unable to speak a word of English and totally mystified as to where he is—it might have been America or Hell, itself—he leads a wretched and hunted existence till the chance kindness of Amy Foster opens his eyes. Afterwards he becomes a farm labourer and marries her. At first she loves him with fascination, but gradually, after her baby is born, her fascination turns into horror. He falls ill and speaks to their little son in his outlandish tongue, and as he speaks she gazes at him with hatred and fear. And then she flees with her child, whilst he, left alone, dies forlorn and broken-hearted.

"Falk" is one of Conrad's Eastern Tales.



(Bankok is known to be the setting though the name is not given.) It is a story within a story. Falk is a Scandinavian, a huge, silent man, fiercely and primitively devoted to life, who falls passionately in love with a young girl acting as companion to the wife of Captain Hermann, a German skipper. She is the Captain's niece, in point of fact. Falk is the owner of a tug that does all the towing up and down this Eastern river, and while Captain Hermann's boat, the *Diana*, is loading, he goes out every evening and sits on board of her, gazing at the girl and saying nothing. In everything he does his conduct is, by turns, hesitating and autocratic. He is a mysterious man, in truth, through the very simplicity of his absorption. In the eyes of Schomberg, the hotel-keeper, however, he is only a contemptible miser. But, indeed, his secret is two-fold, a gnawing jealousy of a young captain (teller of the story), and the awful recollection that he was once compelled to eat human flesh. The jealousy is soon extinguished, but even so, before he can ease his conscience he has to relate the story of his misfortune. It is one of these savage and relentless records of the sea—the record of a broken down steamer, of drifting day after day, of shortage of food, of madness, of cannibalism, and of the survival of the strong. And to the hint of this story the niece, a girl silent as Falk himself, listens with pity. She marries him.

“To-Morrow” (it was dramatised under the title “One Day More” and acted several times in London in 1904, Chicago in 1914, and in Paris—this dramatised version appeared in *The English Review* of August 1913) is a story of hope too long deferred. Old Captain Hagberd, retired from the coasting trade, lives in the little sea-port of Colebrook, passing his

life in the hope that he may see again his son, Harry. He advertises for him in the Sunday papers and he saves every penny against his return. He has even filled his house with furniture for his use, and has even chosen a wife for him—Bessie Carvil, daughter of Carvil, the blind boat-builder, whose house adjoins his own. And gradually this longing to see his son has changed into the mania of senile decay. He believes now that every to-morrow will bring him home. And when, at last, the real Harry does appear, the old man repudiates him with scorn—he is not the one to be taken in by imposters, his Harry is something very different from this “grinning, information fellow!” Besides, it is to-morrow he is coming home—not to-day! And so, with the obstinate assurance of insanity and hope, he locks himself securely from the importunities of a troublesome world. His Harry indeed! But this is not only the story of Captain Hagberd’s delusions, it is the story of Harry Hagberd, the wanderer, the lover of pretty women, the fascinating and romantic scamp, and of Bessie Carvil, the patient daughter of an exacting and brutal father. Their swift love-making in the dusk, within sound of the sullen waves and of the voices of madness and anger, is the climax to this tale of tragic fate.

*Typhoon* is a very remarkable book, not only on account of its merits but also for its great variety. “*Typhoon*,” itself, is the most prodigious description of a storm in the whole of literature. As a piece of word-painting it is unrivalled, and it is at the same time a notable study in psychology and contains some of Conrad’s cleverest character drawing on a small scale. “*Amy Foster*,” on the other hand, has the sober atmosphere of Conrad’s later method. It reads much more like one of the stories in *A Set of Six* than

like the other stories in *Typhoon*. It is a delicate, faithful, and precise picture. "Falk" has the fertile elaboration of Conrad's most expansive work. It is a study in personality and atmosphere that exhales the warm breath of a tropical Eastern river. Falk himself, is a curious figure, and his story remains pathetic in all its gruesomeness. "To-morrow" is a very poignant study, and one touched by the breath of symbolism. In that it resembles "Typhoon," though neither "To-morrow" nor "Typhoon" lack at all the substance of actuality. Their symbolism, though apparent, is kept under strict command, and the realism of their characters and of their situations is the first call upon the reader's attention. Of the four stories in *Typhoon* these two are the most effective, though both "Amy Foster" and "Falk" are true works of imagination.

*A Set of Six* (1908) is Conrad's next collection of stories. As the name implies it consists of six tales—"Gaspar Ruiz," "The Informer," "The Brute," "An Anarchist," "The Duel," and "Il Conde." The first, "Gaspar Ruiz," is a story of the South American wars of Independence at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Gaspar Ruiz is the son of a peasant. He is quite an illiterate, but a man of gentle nature and of great strength. Pressed into the army of liberation, he is captured by the Spaniards and made to fight in their ranks. Falling again into the hands of the liberators he is condemned to death as a traitor, and only escapes by the merest of chances. He is nursed back to life by a Spanish girl, whose aristocratic father, ruined by the rebellion, has been driven crazy. He falls in love with her, and she instils into his heart her undying hatred of the

liberators. For long he is successful, but at last he is overwhelmed.

"The Informer" is an anarchist tale. It is related by Mr X, a famous epicurean and a coldly cynical hater of society. He explains how they (the anarchists in London) became aware that in their secret meetings some spy must always have been present because their most guarded plans were constantly in the knowledge of the police. So, disguised as policemen, he and some comrades raid the house of their own associates, and in the excitement of the arrests discover the informer. He is a fanatic, a sincere man, and impervious to every outside emotion but that of passionate love. It is through this, in his desire to protect a girl who poses as an advanced anarchist (she is the real centre of the story), that he gives himself away. In the sudden discovery of the ruse he commits suicide.

"The Brute" is a tragic tale of the sea—the tale of the ship *Apse Family* that kills a man on every voyage. It is the *Apse Family* that is "the brute," a ship deadly and comfortable. This is a story told in the tap-room of *The Three Cows* by a man who had sailed on her, and whose brother, Charley, had been her chief mate at the same time. On that voyage there had been no accident. In Sidney Charley gets engaged to the skipper's niece, Maggie Colchester, who is with them for the trip, and in his great happiness he takes the strictest care that no disaster shall spoil the homeward passage. And, indeed, all goes well till they are actually in the Thames. And then, in the hideous irony of fate, Maggie Colchester is pulled overboard by the anchor and drowned.

"An Anarchist" recounts the experiences of a convict who has escaped on to the mainland from the

French penal colony off the South American coast. The convict, now engaged in looking after a steam-launch, tells the story with the innocence and resignation of a simple peasant. As a workman in Paris, with good wages, he gave a dinner to some of his friends to celebrate his twenty-fifth birthday. All of them drink and then two other men begin to suggest to him that the lives of poor people are unbearable. He listens with maudlin and violent sympathy. And the result of it is that he makes a disturbance and is imprisoned. When he comes out the anarchists again throw around him their webs. Unable to make a living now, he falls in with their designs. He is caught with a bomb in his hand, and being considered a dangerous criminal, is deported to Cayenne. The story of his life there and of his escape in an open boat with two other wretches, his two original tempters, is graphically recited. When, at length, they are within hail of a ship, he shoots them both dead, and thus revenges himself upon them for all his sufferings.

"The Duel" is much the longest story in the book, but it is one of the easiest to summarise. It is a tale of the Napoleonic wars, and concerns two men, D'Hubert and Feraud. When the story opens they are both lieutenants in the French army stationed in Strasbourg. A trifling disagreement, which is only the irritation of Feraud at being called out of a lady's presence by D'Hubert, who was but obeying superior orders, leads to a duel, and subsequently to a whole series of duels lasting over a period of fourteen years or so. The kindly and indulgent D'Hubert is everlastingly pursued by the challenges of the emotional Feraud. And, finally, D'Hubert, by a stratagem, when he has looked only for immediate death in the latest of the duels, brings it all to a close by giving



back to Feraud the life that he has forfeited. But this takes place when they are both generals, the hundred days a thing of the past, and the wars of Napoleon already a memory.

"Il Conde" is the last of the episodes in *A Set of Six*. It is the story of a foreign Count, a refined, elderly aristocrat, who is driven out of Naples for ever by the brutal behaviour of a young man. Il Conde, a man of cultured and sensitive mind, would sometimes go of an evening to listen to the band in the gardens of the Villa Nazionale. It was there, while wandering in the shady paths, that he is accosted by a young man who asks for a light. Il Conde puts his hands into his pockets to find a match, and on glancing up he sees that the young man is holding a sharp knife to his stomach. In a grating and menacing voice he demands his money. Il Conde has to disgorge. Later on that same evening he meets him again in a restaurant, and again the man threatens him with foul and insolent words. Such a pit of infamy, opening like this at his very feet and full of nameless horrors for the future, so undermines the old man's peace of mind that he leaves Naples, never to return—although he knows well enough that there alone can he find the climate in which he can survive the chills of winter.

The six tales of this book present a striking change in Conrad's technique. Their atmosphere of romance tends to the inward contemplation of a mood rather than the piling up of substantial effect. They are, in many externals, very unlike this earlier work. For, of his previous tales, "Amy Foster," alone, is of the *genre* of *A Set of Six*. And, in fact, they do not gleam with the exuberance of poetical emotion—they are restrained, low-toned, and woven of a close mesh.



They are the work of an artist who makes his points out of subtleties rather than out of romantic flights. Of the individual stories, "Gaspar Ruiz" is hardly convincing—especially in its later phases; "The Informer" is sardonically icy; "The Brute," "An Anarchist," and "Il Conde" are pathetic, exciting, and beautifully proportioned; "The Duel" is a work of wide imaginative impulse—a wonderful reconstruction of the Napoleonic atmosphere. This story is the most remarkable in the book—the comparison between D'Hubert and Feraud is capital, and the whole idea, if slightly fantastic, shows, at any rate, a grip of human foibles and jealousy which is really entertaining. As a sustained effort in Conrad's sardonic later style "The Duel" is unmatched.

Conrad's most recent volume of stories is *'Twi*xt *Land and Sea* (1912), and it contains three tales—"A Smile of Fortune," "The Secret Sharer," and "Freya of the Seven Islands." "A Smile of Fortune" is a story of a tropical isle (obviously Mauritius), the story of a captain who brings his ship there and falls straightway into the web of a curious and sinister drama. He comes in contact with the two brothers Jacobus who are bitter enemies. The one who has disowned his illegitimate son is universally respected, the other who protects his illegitimate daughter is looked at askance. But stress is not laid upon this ironical position, and, apart from the intrigues of the outcast Jacobus (an inscrutable, sordid, and self-sacrificing man whose one ostensible motive in life is avarice, but of whom we half get a secret and quite different impression), the story relates, in main, the queer intimacy between the Captain and the daughter of Jacobus. This passionate and wild girl

suggests an underworld of emotions, whose shadows lie darkly across the pages.

"The Secret Sharer" tells how a Captain, anchored in his ship at the head of the Gulf of Siam, rescues a murderer from the water (the mate of another boat), and hides him in his cabin, and enables him to escape. It has all the excitement of a perilous adventure, and it is told with such exactitude of detail and in such a thrilling, secret manner (for the conversations between the two men are invariably carried on in an undertone, and this comes to pervade the whole story as a kind of twilight) that it reads very like a genuine reminiscence.

The third story, "Freya of the Seven Islands," is a tragic tale of the Malay Archipelago. It concerns four people, Captain Jasper Allen of the brig *Bonito*, Freya Nielsen, her father, and the Dutch lieutenant Heemskirk. Freya and Jasper adore one another with the silent intensity of confident and faithful natures, but grim destiny is lying in wait for them. Heemskirk is the devil of the piece. His jealousy evolves a plan by which the *Bonito* is wrecked, and with it all Jasper's chances of worldly success. And, in the despair of their lost hope, life swiftly loosens its hold upon the man and the girl. It is a story opening in light and closing in impenetrable darkness.

In subject and technique these three stories are a return to Conrad's earlier work while they retain the finish of his later period. The style is extremely distinguished and the psychology subtle without being at all overdone. The first of them, "A Smile of Fortune," is a very uncommon study in the bizarre backwaters of character. Both Jacobus and his daughter are amongst Conrad's most original figures. His mumbling reserve and her futile and incoherent

sorrow, seem to throw a heavy air of gloom into the very sunlight of the Tropics. As for "The Secret Sharer," that is certainly a marvellous creation in atmosphere and in the psychology of the hunted. It is convincing, as I have already said, so convincing that we feel we could hear the dropping of a pin in the whispered conversations of the two men. Moreover, it has a curious undercurrent. It develops, more and more strongly, a haunting idea of the discipline of the sea. The last and longest tale, "Freya of the Seven Islands," is, perhaps, the most painful Conrad has ever written. There is something deeply melancholy in this drama set amidst the treacherous splendour of Eastern Seas. But the nobility of such figures as Freya and Jasper makes the story of their defeated love not alone melancholy but in the fullest degree touching.

I will say a few words now about the two novels in the writing of which Conrad collaborated with Ford Hueffer. (There is, if I may say so, something especially odd about this collaboration, because the abilities of Joseph Conrad and Ford Hueffer do lie so obviously in different lines. But perhaps it arose from their common interest in form.) The first of these is *The Inheritors* (1901). As the work bears very little impress of the touch of Conrad and as it is, altogether, of small importance I will treat it as shortly as possible. It is a fantastic story about a new race of people, dwellers in a fourth dimension, who mix indistinguishably with ordinary mortals and gradually oust them from all positions of supreme power. They are "the inheritors," and with their power, their will, and their disregard of feeling or honour, they are a ruthless and repulsive race. They scheme to ruin the Prime

Minister through ruining a German financier whom he is supporting in his plan for a Greenland railway, and of course they succeed. The book closes at the dawn of their inheritance of the earth.

As I say, this is a work in a quite minor key. It is cleverly written, but it is without depth of thought or beauty of style. The internal evidence of Conrad's collaboration is slight—visible, indeed, only in the negative qualities of proportion and restraint.

*Romance* (1903) stands on a very different footing. As far as I can judge Conrad must have had a great deal to do with the middle part of this book. It certainly glows with a vividness that is all his own. It is a novel of adventure of ninety years since, starting with an exploit amongst smugglers on the Kentish coast, and then taking the young hero, John Kemp, to Jamacia and on to Cuba where he undergoes incredible hardships and dangers, and gains the love of a Spanish girl of startling beauty and fabulous wealth. There are plots and counterplots on every page, there are murderous pirates and a still more murderous Irish judge of the Havana Supreme Court, there are deaths, and there is revenge, and always there is danger and passionate love. I do not attempt to tell the story in any detail because it is a sheer novel of adventure, and the glory of it lies in its colour and shifting lights. But I may say finally that John Kemp, who had to flee from the "runners" in the first instance, is brought home in irons on a charge of murder and piracy in Cuba. That he never committed such atrocities comes out, at last, at his old Bailey trial; and the end of it all is that he marries his lovely Seraphina and settles down to a safer and milder life in England.

*Romance* is, indeed, a work of blazing imagination. It has all the paraphernalia of the sheer story of adventure, but its atmosphere, unlike most of its psychology, is not merely on the surface. It is a book dyed with colour to the very centre of its heart. Moreover, it is written in a very expansive and delightful style and contains many passages of true power and emotion.

With *Romance* I finish my *resumés* of Conrad's novels and stories. In one sense they are like reviews and may serve a similar purpose, but in another way they are different. For in a review the plot should be told by implication rather than by direct description, whereas my idea here has been to outline the idea of the plot as simply and concisely as I could. And in a review one tries to say as much as one conveniently can, but in these *resumés* I have purposely avoided the subtler points of criticism. And I have avoided them because I do not wish to be guilty of repetition. It is the future chapters that are the critical ones.

With these words of self-defence, and with the warning I gave at the beginning against any assumption that this chapter is meant to be of critical value, I will close this unvarnished and lengthy examination of the novels and stories of Joseph Conrad.



## CHAPTER IV

### CONRAD'S ATMOSPHERE

CONRAD is one of the great masters of atmosphere—that thing so hard to define and so easy to perceive. For atmosphere is not simply a background, it is an essence vitally affecting the spirit of a work. When we say that Velasquez is a master of light or Rembrandt a master of shadow we have something in mind more complex than mere light or shadow. For atmosphere is, at once, the unconscious touchstone of personality and a self-conscious effort to create a definite illusion. Think, for instance, of the poetry of Walt Whitman—a most impressive example. Indeed atmosphere permeates a work by the sheer might of imagination. And it is of both these conceptions I am thinking when I say that Conrad is one of the great masters of atmosphere. For with him atmosphere runs through the entire range of its possible import. His personality is for ever radiating itself through his work; and, as for his conscious creation of an atmosphere, it can either be a description of natural phenomena thrown upon the scene of a tropic setting to heighten the sense of beauty or corruption, or it can be a brooding spirit filling with terror, with pity, or with delight the whole nervous energy of a story. For the romantic mind is highly obscure and capable of all kinds of double experiences. The mournful philosophy of Conrad is stamped by him upon the wilds and upon men



living in vain hope and constant endeavour. And how valuable an artistic background it is. This fatalism casts a glamour over these tropical forests, over these enormous rivers, over the unbroken silences of the wilderness. And it gives to human courage and endurance an almost sublime nobility. Look at Captain MacWhirr in *Typhoon*—a dense, unimaginative, stupid man, a man who would bore you to death in five minutes. And yet simply by the force of his dogged and unbending resistance to the storm he emerges an heroic figure. There is something epic about Captain MacWhirr. I often wonder whether Conrad's real intention in writing this story were not to show what unconquerable faithfulness can accomplish, to show that man is, in a sense, superior to all the violence of the sea.

This interplay of mind and atmosphere (if I may so call it) is more noticeable in Conrad's earlier than in his later books. For in his later books his whole tone has become more impersonal—he has stepped back a little with his own emotions and has developed into an ironical observer rather than into a philosopher. But in his earlier work it grips you overpoweringly. His books and his characters are saturated with the sunlight and the gloom of tropical lands or flowing seas, and, conversely, the tropical lands, or the sea, or even Northern winter nights take on the beautiful or sinister aspect of the actors' minds. Consider, for instance, that strange story, "The Return," in which the very quietness of the house assumes a morbid and fateful aspect in the brain of Alvan Hervey. His chaotic emotions have invested the discreet respectability of his home with all the nameless horrors of an Inferno. Let me give a typical quotation :—

He saw her come up gradually, as if ascending from a well. At every step the feeble flame of the candle swayed before her tired, young face, and the darkness of the hall seemed to cling to her black skirt, followed her, rising like a silent flood, as though the great night of the world had broken through the discreet reserve of walls, of closed doors, of curtained windows. It rose over the steps, it leaped up the walls like an angry wave, it flowed over the blue skies, over the yellow sands, over the sunshine of landscapes, and over the pretty pathos of ragged innocence and of meek starvation. It swallowed up the delicious idyll in a boat and the mutilated immortality of famous bas-reliefs. It flowed from outside—it rose higher, in a destructive silence. And, above it, the woman of marble, composed and blind on the high pedestal, seemed to ward off the devouring night with a cluster of lights.

✓ He watched the rising tide of impenetrable gloom with impatience, as if anxious for the coming of a darkness black enough to conceal a shameful surrender. It came nearer. The cluster of lights went out. The girl ascended facing him. Behind her the shadow of a colossal woman danced lightly on the wall. He held his breath while she passed by, noiseless and with heavy eyelids. And on her track the flowing tide of a tenebrous sea filled the house, seemed to swirl about his feet, and rising unchecked, closed silently above his head.

The time had come but he did not open the door. All was still ; and instead of surrendering to the reasonable exigencies of life he stepped out, with a rebelling heart, into the darkness of the house. It was the abode of an impenetrable night ; as though indeed the last day had come and gone, leaving him alone in a darkness that has no tomorrow. And looming vaguely below the woman of marble, livid and still like a patient phantom, held out in the night a cluster of extinguished lights. (*Tales of Unrest*, "The Return," pp. 264-5.)

And in contrast to that, recall how Marlow in "Youth" lays upon the magic of the East the still more thrilling magic of youth and desire :—

And this is how I see the East. I have seen its secret

places and have looked into its very soul ; but now I see it always from a small boat, a high outline of mountains, blue and afar in the morning ; like faint mist at noon ; a jagged wall of purple at sunset. I have the feel of the oar in my hand, the vision of a scorching blue sea in my eyes. And I see a bay, a wide bay, smooth as glass and polished like ice, shimmering in the dark. A red light burns far off upon the gloom of the land, and the night is soft and warm. We drag at the oars with aching arms, and suddenly a puff of wind, a puff faint and tepid and laden with strange odours of blossoms, of aromatic wood, comes out of the still night—the first sigh of the East on my face. That I can never forget. It was impalpable and enslaving, like a charm, like a whispered promise of mysterious delight. (*Youth*, “Youth,” pp. 41-2.)

There, surely, is the very reaction of temperament and atmosphere.

And Conrad, like many other great writers, like Shakespeare in *The Merchant of Venice*, Shelley in numerous lyrics, Whitman in prose and poetry, Meredith in *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, impresses this singular image of a sentient nature upon the intimate moments of passionate love or passionate regret. There is a wonderful instance of this in “Tomorrow,” where Bessie Carvil is talking in the dark to the stranger who has awakened in her so suddenly the stirrings of romance :—

Again he stooped silently to hear better ; and the deep night buried everything of the whispering woman and the attentive man, except the familiar contiguity of their faces, with its air of secrecy and caress.” (*Typhoon*, “Tomorrow,” p. 288.)

In its suggestion of mysterious enticement this whole scene is thrilling. And, indeed, that is precisely what Conrad's atmosphere is—it is thrilling. That

is one of the main reasons why *Nostramo* is so extraordinary. To me there is something almost terribly thrilling in the idea of the Placid Gulf with the three little islands lying on its fringe shutting in Sulaco from the sea-breezes, of the sierras capped by "the snows of Higuerota." And, almost more than in any of his books, is the atmosphere of *Nostramo* obtained by a cumulative effect—a sustained and subtle inter-action of the physical and the spiritual characteristics of the land and its people. In *Nostramo* Conrad hardly ever uses the obvious suggestions of fatalism presented by the exuberance or callousness of nature (partly, no doubt, because he is writing of an unfamiliar world), and his touch is altogether lighter. The result is that, whereas his positive descriptions lack in their beautiful ease, a certain grandeur, the whole emotion of the book is intensely profound and thrilling. But let me give one example of Conrad's manner in *Nostramo* :—

The declining sun had shifted the shadows from west to east amongst the houses of the town. It had shifted them upon the whole extent of the immense Campo, with the white walls of its haciendas on the knolls dominating the green distances ; with its grass-thatched ranchos crouching in the folds of ground by the banks of streams ; with the dark islands of clustered trees on a clear sea of grass, and the precipitous range of the Cordillera, immense and motionless, emerging from the billows of the lower forests like the barren coast of a land of giants. The sunset rays striking the snow-slope of Higuerota from afar gave it an air of rosy youth, while the serrated mass of distant peaks remained black, as if calcined in the fiery radiance. The undulating surface of the forest seemed powdered with pale gold dust ; and away there, beyond Rincon, hidden from the town by two wooded spurs, the rocks of the San Tomé gorge, with the flat wall of the mountain itself crowned by gigantic ferns, took on warm tones of brown and yellow, with red rusty streaks,

and the dark green clumps of bushes in crevices. (*Nostromo*, p. 332.)

*Nostromo*, I repeat once more, is Conrad's most astonishing achievement. When we realise that he evolved this whole panorama, so complete and multi-fold, from the descriptions in an old book of his childhood and from two flying visits to South American ports—visits extending, perhaps, to twelve hours in all—we feel how boundless are the limits of imagination. For Costaguana lives before us in the very poetry of a marvellous realism. I know that Western coast slightly, from Panama down to Callao, and I can only assert that Costaguana is a perfect re-creation of the atmosphere of a South American Republic of the Ecquadorian kind (a cooler Equador, let us say), perfect in its delicate and just perception both of the character of the country and the character of the population. I call *Nostromo* one of the most tremendous books I have ever read. It is the great example of Conrad's vast capacity for building up the very illusion of reality out of practically nothing.

And talking, as we were a moment ago, of thrilling descriptions, observe how he pictures the tropics of Africa and the East. They are like a hashish vision—a loveliness tinged with poison. Who could deny that such a story as "Youth" has the quality of a dream which, realised for an instant, departs for ever? This is how Marlow sees the East for the first time:—

The scented obscurity of the shore was grouped into vast masses, a density of colossal clumps of vegetation, probably—mute and fantastic shapes. And at their foot the semicircle of a beach gleamed faintly, like an illusion. There was not a light, not a stir, not a sound. The mysterious East faced me, perfumed like a flower, silent like death, dark like a grave. (*Youth*, "Youth," p. 42.)



In "Heart of Darkness" Conrad portrays the might of the jungle. You can almost sniff the "primeval mud" of the Congo :—

The great wall of vegetation, an exuberant and entangled mass of trunks, branches, leaves, boughs, festoons, motionless in the moonlight, was like a rioting invasion of soundless life, a rolling wave of plants, piled up, crested, ready to topple over the creek, to sweep every little man of us out of his little existence. (*Youth*, "Heart of Darkness," p. 98.)

The fact is, Conrad has an amazing command of language—very moving, fateful, and poetical. Just read a description like the following. I give it because it shows his power of words in full accord with his capability for creating an atmosphere :—

Razumov stamped his foot—and under the soft carpet of snow felt the hard ground of Russia, inanimate, cold, inert, like a sullen and tragic mother hiding her face under a winding-sheet—his native soil!—his very own—without a fireside, without a heart!

He cast his eyes upwards and stood amazed. The snow had ceased to fall, and now, as if by a miracle, he saw above his head the clear black sky of the northern winter, decorated with the sumptuous fires of the stars. It was a canopy fit for the resplendent purity of the snows.

Razumov received an almost physical impression of endless space and of countless millions.

He responded to it with the readiness of a Russian who is born to an inheritance of space and numbers. Under the sumptuous immensity of the sky, the snow covered the endless forests, the frozen rivers, the plains of an immense country, obliterating the landmarks, the accidents of the ground, levelling everything under its uniform whiteness, like a monstrous blank page awaiting the record of an inconceivable history. (*Under Western Eyes*, pp. 30-1.)

Very splendid. Indeed, there is no one who can



write such prose-poetry, not the usual prose-poetry of word-painting alone, but descriptions of great beauty infused with a sort of melancholy—the melancholy of the wilds, of the sea-wastes, of the craving heart of man. I would like to give here two supreme instances of what I mean—both from *Lord Jim*. I cannot help thinking they must be the most magnificent things of their kind ever written :—

A marvellous stillness pervaded the world, and the stars, together with the serenity of their rays, seemed to shed upon the earth the assurance of everlasting security. The young moon recurved, and shining low in the west, was like a slender shaving thrown up from a bar of gold, and the Arabian Sea, smooth and cool to the eye like a sheet of ice, extended its perfect level to the perfect circle of a dark horizon. The propeller turned without a check, as though its beat had been part of the scheme of a safe universe ; and on each side of the *Patna* two deep folds of water, permanent and sombre on the unwrinkled shimmer, enclosed within their straight and diverging ridges a few white swirls of foam bursting in a low hiss, a few wavelets, a few ripples, a few undulations that, left behind, agitated the surface of the sea for an instant after the passage of the ship, subsided splashing gently, calmed down at last into the circular stillness of water and sky with the black speck of the moving hull remaining everlastingly in its centre. (*Lord Jim*, pp. 16-7.)

The thin gold shaving of the moon floating slowly downwards had lost itself on the darkened surface of the waters, and the eternity beyond the sky seemed to come down nearer to the earth, with the augmented glitter of the stars, with the more profound sombreness in the lustre of the half-transparent dome covering the flat disc of an opaque sea. The ship moved so smoothly that her onward motion was imperceptible to the senses of men, as though she had been a crowded planet speeding through the dark spaces of ether behind the swarm of suns, in the appalling and calm solitudes

awaiting the breath of future creations. (*Lord Jim*, pp. 21-2.)

✓ Conrad's astonishing power of visualisation is shown in such pictures, a power here used poetically, but always evident in his capacity for grasping an atmosphere, and grasping it so strongly that he makes it not only real at the moment of description but pervasive all through the narrative. For his characters do seem to stand against a background that wields a charm over them. And they gain an added reality from it, because they justify so completely a sense of fitness. Their reality is precisely of the *genre* their setting demands. Thus, in *Nostramo*, a figure like Sotillo, the cruel, greedy, and cowardly colonel of the Esmeralda regiment, has a type of mind impossible outside of a certain class of debased and ignorant South American—a veneer of polish covering a barbarous blackness of the heart. And thus, in *The Secret Agent*, the incoherent and troubled intelligence of Mr Verloc is like a shadow of his incoherent and troubled world.

*The Secret Agent* is, indeed, one of Conrad's real triumphs in atmosphere. How exactly it suggests the squalid, the sordid neglect of Mr Verloc's shop, and how well it gives at a glance the whole spirit of the underground and compromising life of the anarchists:—

The window contained photographs of more or less undressed dancing girls; nondescript packages in wrappers like patent medicines; closed yellow paper envelopes, very flimsy, and marked two-and-six in heavy black figures; a few numbers of ancient French comic publications hung across a string as if to dry; a dingy blue china bowl, a casket of black wood, bottles of marking ink, and rubber stamps; a few books, with titles hinting at impropriety; a few

apparently old copies of obscure newspapers, badly printed, with titles like *The Torch*, *The Gong*—rousing titles. And the two gas jets inside the panes were always turned low, either for economy's sake or for the sake of the customers. (*The Secret Agent*, pp. 1-2.)

I may be blamed for giving so many specimens of Conrad's prose, but I give them because they are indeed significant. For they are the very emanation of his changing moods—the moods that enwrap with their filmy and invisible bonds the different novels and stories of Joseph Conrad. For to Conrad, the creation of an atmosphere, whether that atmosphere be mainly physical as in his earlier work or mainly spiritual as in his later work, is his first and all-important care. For remember that every one of Conrad's characters is not only a personality but is definitely part of the structure of the book—part of the whole effect; and as to the effect, Conrad is for ever paving the way to it—he is tireless in building up the semblance of an inevitable reality. In other words, his approach to our sympathies is largely through the medium of an intensely imagined atmosphere. Indeed, Conrad's theory would seem to be this, that without atmosphere there can be no such thing as veritability. He imagines a definite scene and situation, a definite group of figures, and he has to make them as alive to us as they are to him. That is the whole object of his art. The surrounding air in which he envelops his stories is the reflection of his own clear and visionary grasp. His figures are as much part of his atmosphere as is the external world. The high beauty of his landscapes, the high reality of his characters, are, alike, the creation of one mood. And though his moods do vary enormously they always aim towards a similar effect—the fixing in the minds

✓ of his readers of that illusion which he has in his own mind. It is because his imagination is profound that his atmosphere is arresting. It is the vessel into which he pours the detail of his idea—a metaphor which may be followed up by observing that if the vessel were so much as to crack then out it would slip. Conrad's victory is in the vividness and constant reality of his moods. Think, for instance, of a story like "The Secret Sharer." What could be more extraordinary than the whispering suspense that fills it? It is so true, so unfaltering, that it grows into a heavy, breathless weight upon the life of the whole ship. His atmosphere is indeed at times so strong with the menace of disaster or the promise of delight that it becomes acutely oppressive. Think of "Heart of Darkness" where the repetition of Mr Kurtz's name echoing like a refrain through the savage heart of the wilderness gives a dream-like and legendary emotion to the whole experience, or of "To-morrow" where the defeat of love and hope is symbolic of all the lost romance of illusion, or of "Youth" where the reality of a gorgeous ideal is tinged by the glowing colours of adventure, or of "A Smile of Fortune" where the dark isolation of the garden throws its mantle of exotic perfume and desire over the seated figure of the girl, or of "The Return" where the disruption of a belief fills the house with the deadly whispers of despair and horror. And who has imagined the spirit of tragic fate more convincingly? One reads "The End of the Tether" or "Freya of the Seven Islands" with a feeling of grave uneasiness. In fact, the uneasiness is almost too terrible in the second of these tales. One can just bear the pathos of "The End of the Tether" as one can just bear the pathos of Dostoievsky's *Poor Folk* but the anguish of "Freya

of the Seven Islands" is like the anguish of Turgenev's *The Torrents of Spring* or of Shakespeare's *Othello*—inconsolable, agonising. Such stories lacerate within us the very roots of indignant pity.

And then again, as I say later on in my chapter on irony, Conrad can invest a whole book with a spirit of irony, which is a very real atmosphere—an atmosphere enclosing, as it were, another atmosphere. *The Secret Agent*, of course, is the classic example of this.

And I should like to point out here a curious thing about writers whose sense of atmosphere is so tremendous—a thing exemplified very clearly in Conrad's work—and that is, not only that their realism is often touched by a symbolic significance but that this symbolic significance does not undermine their realism, but gives it, on the contrary, an added suppleness. Symbolic writing that has its foundations in symbolism rather than in atmosphere, produces, as every one knows, a dream-effect totally unrelated to realism, but symbolism arising from an overwhelming sense of atmosphere has the lyric quality of high reality. We can note this, as I will show in my chapter on Conrad's men, in such people as Captain MacWhirr (just imagine what Yeats or Maeterlinck would have made of Captain MacWhirr!), young Marlow, Harry Hagberd, old Singleton, and so on; and in regard to places, things, events, it is equally visible. Consider, for instance, Conrad's attitude towards the sea and ships. No one could deny that it is an attitude fraught with symbolism. You may even call it the "pathetic fallacy" if you choose—names do not matter. For to Conrad the sea is the glorious, fickle, and relentless master of sailors' lives—a being at once immortal and change-



able; while ships are trusty and enduring friends imbued with the faith, the weakness, and the charm of beautiful women. But what I want to emphasise here is that this symbolic view is not in the least divorced from realism. No one has created more convincingly the magic of the sea. His descriptions throb with the very sweep of its waves, with the very illusion of its calms. But his seas are real, his ships are real, and the whole life of sailors is portrayed with the uttermost depth of poetical reality. The august splendour of the sea is enshrined for ever in Conrad's stories. For if, in his descriptions of the hearts of men or the wilds of forests or the streets of cities, there creeps often a sense of weariness, of futility, and of discouragement, in his descriptions of the sea and of its life there shines a perennial freshness and joy. I cannot refrain from giving a few examples of this. And first I shall quote from *The Mirror of the Sea*, a comparatively little-known book of great beauty, into which Conrad has thrown all his passionate love of seas and ships. And the passage I shall quote does not praise the sea as noble in itself, but praises its nameless attraction and the faithful ships that gird it from pole to pole :—

For all that has been said of the love that certain natures (on shore) have professed to feel for it, for all the celebrations it has been the object of in prose and song, the sea has never been friendly to man. At most it has been the accomplice of human restlessness, and playing the part of dangerous abettor of world-wide ambitions. Faithful to no race after the manner of the kindly earth, receiving no impress from valour and toil and self-sacrifice, recognising no finality of dominion, the sea has never adopted the cause of its masters like those lands where the victorious nations of mankind have taken root, rocking their cradles and setting up their grave-stones. He—man or people—who, putting his trust in the

friendship of the sea, neglects the strength and cunning of his right hand, is a fool ! As if it were too great, too mighty for common virtues, the ocean has no compassion, no faith, no law, no memory. Its fickleness is to be held true to men's purposes only by an undaunted resolution and by a sleepless, armed, jealous vigilance, in which, perhaps, there has always been more hate than love. *Odi et amo* may well be the confession of those who consciously or blindly have surrendered their existence to the fascination of the sea. All the tempestuous passions of mankind's young days, the love of loot and the love of glory, the love of adventure and the love of danger, with the great love of the unknown and vast dreams of dominion and power, have passed like images reflected from a mirror, leaving no record upon the mysterious face of the sea. Impenetrable and heartless, the sea has given nothing of itself to the suitors for its precarious favours. Unlike the earth, it cannot be subjugated at any cost of patience or toil. For all its fascination that has lured so many to a violent death, its immensity has never been loved as the mountains, the plains, the desert itself, have been loved. Indeed, I suspect that, leaving aside the protestations and tributes of writers who, one is safe in saying, care for little else in the world than the rhythm of their lines and the cadence of their phrase, the love of the sea, to which some men and nations confess so readily, is a complex sentiment wherein pride enters for much, necessity for not a little, and the love of ships—the untiring servants of our hopes and our self-esteem—for the best and most genuine part. (*The Mirror of the Sea*, pp. 211-3.)

And the next I shall quote from that sea-epic, *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* :—

The declining moon drooped sadly in the western board as if withered by the cold touch of a pale dawn. The ship slept. And the immortal sea stretched away, immense and hazy, like the image of life, with a glittering surface and lightless depths ; promising, empty, inspiring—terrible. (*The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* pp. 230-1.)

And then from *An Outcast of the Islands* :—

The sea, perhaps because of its saltness, roughens the outside but keeps sweet the kernel of its servants' soul. The old sea ; the sea of many years ago, whose servants were devoted slaves and went from youth to age or to a sudden grave without needing to open the book of life, because they could look at eternity reflected on the element that gave the life and dealt the death. Like a beautiful and unscrupulous woman, the sea of the past was glorious in its smiles, irresistible in its anger, capricious, enticing, illogical, irresponsible ; a thing to love, a thing to fear. It cast a spell, it gave joy, it lulled gently into boundless faith ; then with quick and causeless anger it killed. But its cruelty was redeemed by the charm of its inscrutable mystery, by the immensity of its promise, by the supreme witchery of its possible favour. (*An Outcast of the Islands*, p. 13.)

And for a picture of another kind—I think the following description is unapproachable :—

Next morning, at daylight, the *Narcissus* went to sea.

A slight haze blurred the horizon. Outside the harbour the measureless expanse of smooth water lay sparkling like a floor of jewels, and as empty as the sky. The short black tug gave a pluck to windward, in the usual way, then let go the rope, and hovered for a moment on the quarter with her engines stopped ; while the slim, long hull of the ship moved ahead slowly under lower topsails. The loose upper canvas blew out in the breeze with soft round contours, resembling small white clouds snared in the maze of ropes. Then the sheets were hauled home, the yards hoisted, and the ship became a high and lonely pyramid, gliding, all shining and white, through the sunlit mist. The tug turned short round and went away towards the land. Twenty-six pairs of eyes watched her low broad stern crawling languidly over the smooth swell between the two paddle-wheels that turned fast, beating the water with fierce hurry. She resembled an enormous and aquatic blackbeetle, surprised by the light, overwhelmed by the sunshine, trying to escape with ineffectual effort into the distant gloom of the land. She left a lingering smudge of smoke on the sky, and two

vanishing trails of foam on the water. On the place where she had stopped a round black patch of soot remained, undulating on the swell—an unclean mark of the creature's rest.

The *Narcissus* left alone, heading south, seemed to stand resplendent and still upon the restless sea, under the moving sun. Flakes of foam swept past her sides; the water struck her with flashing blows; the land glided away, slowly fading; a few birds screamed on motionless wings over the swaying mastheads. But soon the land disappeared, the birds went away; and to the west the pointed sail of an Arab dhow running for Bombay, rose triangular and upright above the sharp edge of the horizon, lingered, and vanished like an illusion. Then the ship's wake, long and straight, stretched itself out through a day of immense solitude. The setting sun, burning on the level of the water, flamed crimson below the blackness of heavy rain clouds. The sunset squall, coming up from behind, dissolved itself into the short deluge of a hissing shower. It left the ship glistening from trucks to waterline, and with darkened sails. She ran easily before a fair monsoon, with her decks cleared for the night; and, moving along with her, was heard the sustained and monotonous swishing of the waves, mingled with the low whispers of men mustered aft for the setting of watches; the short plaint of some block aloft; or, now and then, a loud sigh of wind. (*The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* pp. 38-40.)

But I must not let these grand passages lure me from the purpose of my book. I will give but one more quotation about ships—and in no other passage of Conrad is the alembic of their mysterious appeal more exquisitely embalmed:—

The brig's business was on uncivilised coasts, with obscure rajahs dwelling in nearly unknown bays; with native settlements up mysterious rivers opening their sombre, forest-lined estuaries among a welter of pale green reefs and dazzling sand-banks, in lonely straits of calm blue water all aglitter with sunshine. Alone, far from the beaten tracks, she glided, all white, round dark, frowning headlands,



stole out, silent like a ghost, from behind points of land stretching out all black in the moonlight ; or lay hove-to, like a sleeping sea-bird, under the shadow of some nameless mountain waiting for a signal. She would be glimpsed suddenly on misty, squally days dashing disdainfully aside the short aggressive waves of the Java Sea ; or be seen far, far away, a tiny dazzling white speck flying across the brooding purple masses of thunderclouds piled up on the horizon. (*Twixt land and Sea*, " Freya of the Seven Islands," p. 189.)

And it is in such-wise, though indeed with a hundred variations, that the life of the sea and of ships appears to Conrad. It is a passion which pulses in the very heart of his books, imparting to them, amidst the cynical aspects of his philosophy, a real fervour of remembrance. It is the rejuvenating atmosphere of the sea that gives to Conrad's most typical work its everlasting appeal.

But, of course, we have to remember that Conrad has an intimate feeling for the sea, which must be accepted as such. It colours his work almost as a recognised bias colours the work of some historians. Its whole life is steeped for him in a glow of incommunicable romance and affection. In treating of it Conrad's critical sense is sometimes in abeyance before the delight of his generous enthusiasm. True, his melancholy philosophy does pervade his descriptions of the ocean, but it is more often the melancholy of memory than of disillusion. His inborn love of the sea has grown stronger from year to year. For this is the ideal passion, whose only reward is the knowledge of toil and conquest.

And, to follow up another train of the argument, we may note that Conrad invests his characters to a very marked degree with the atmosphere of their own personality. I am aware that, in a sense, this



is only to say that his characters are very real ; but in a sense it also does imply something more. Tolstoy's characters, for instance, are real, but they do not impress their own personality upon their surroundings in the way Conrad's characters do. It may be thought that I am forcing a point in saying this, but I hardly think I am. For a long time past I have tried to account to myself for the special quality of vividness in Conrad's characters, and it is this explanation alone which reasonably satisfies my judgment. For even those characters of his which are quite untouched by any symbolic significance appear, as it were, steeped in the impalpable glow of their own personality. I daresay I do not make myself particularly plain—for, indeed it is a thing well-nigh impossible to make plain to anyone who does not know Conrad's books. But I believe that those who do know them will follow me. And here, perhaps, we may find one of the reasons for Conrad's comparative unpopularity. I will be explicit. We know that some novelists of marked ability possess so curiously wrought a style that reality is actually impossible to them (Conrad's own collaborator, Ford Hueffer, is a striking instance of this)—their style seems to get not only between the reader and the book but even between the novelist and the book : and, conversely, some novelists are so real, that their reality overwhelms their readers. This is at once the danger and the glory of the atmospheric method.

And applied, as Conrad also applies it, to the external world of surroundings this intense discernment of characteristics gives his work that astonishing richness of atmosphere which is almost equally bewildering to some of his readers. For his forests, his rivers, his swamps exhale the very spirit of their

wild and sombre appearance. Do you remember that scene in "Heart of Darkness" where the two plotters are overheard by Marlow in their vile agreement to trust to the wilderness :—

"They die so quick, too, that I haven't the time to send them out of the country—it's incredible!" "H'm. Just so," grunted the uncle. "Ah! my boy, trust to this—I say, trust to this." I saw him extend his short flipper of an arm for a gesture that took in the forest, the creek, the mud, the river,—seemed to beckon with a dishonouring flourish before the sunlit face of the land a treacherous appeal to the lurking death, to the hidden evil, to the profound darkness of its heart. It was so startling that I leaped to my feet and looked back at the edge of the forest, as though I had expected an answer of some sort to that black display of confidence. You know the foolish notions that come to one sometimes. The high stillness confronted these two figures with its ominous patience, waiting for the passing away of a fantastic invasion. (*Youth*, "Heart of Darkness," pp. 103-4.)

That is what I mean when I say that Conrad's atmosphere, itself, can arouse an uneasy and disconcerting emotion in the reader—an antagonistic emotion arising from the deep inborn dread of darkness.

People have complained that when Conrad writes of England and of Northern countries in general his atmosphere has the opulence of the tropics. There is certainly foundation for this complaint if one assumes that atmosphere is in the main a matter of climate—for instance, as I pointed out in my first chapter, the London of *The Secret Agent* is strangely exotic—but if one assumes that it is principally a matter of temperament, then the justice of the complaint is largely overborne, though the statement, as regards his earlier works, is, I repeat, accurate enough. Every

one would agree that this Kentish landscape is exotic :—

With the sun hanging low on its western limit, the expanse of the grass-lands framed in the counter-scarps of the rising ground took on a gorgeous and sombre aspect. A sense of penetrating sadness, like that inspired by a grave strain of music, disengaged itself from the silence of the fields. The men we met walked past, slow, unsmiling, with downcast eyes, as if the melancholy of an over-burdened earth had weighted their feet, bowed their shoulders, borne down their glances. (*Typhoon*, "Amy Foster," p. 121.)

Yes, every one would agree that it is an exotic description, but to say that it is too far fetched is rather like saying that the descriptions in Keats' "The Eve of Saint Mark" are too far fetched. For both are animated by the same sort of imagination.

But, in his later works, even that accusation does not hold altogether good. Let me give an example from "The Duel," in which the snowy Russia of the retreat from Moscow is presented more from a European standpoint, and presented, too, with powerful realism :—

The only stragglers were those who fell out to give up to the frost their exhausted souls. They plodded on, and their passage did not disturb the mortal silence of the plains, shining with the livid light of snows under a sky the colour of ashes. Whirlwinds ran along the fields, broke against the dark column, enveloped it in a turmoil of flying icicles, and subsided, disclosing it creeping on its tragic way without the swing and rhythm of the military pace. It struggled onwards, the men exchanging neither words nor looks; whole ranks marched touching elbow, day after day and never raising their eyes from the ground, as if lost in despairing reflections. In the dumb, black forests of pines the cracking of overloaded branches was the only sound they heard. Often from daybreak to dusk no one spoke in the

whole column. It was like a *macabre* march of struggling corpses towards a distant grave. (*A Set of Six*, "The Duel," pp. 226-7.)

But I will admit that one misses in Conrad the soft, dreamy atmosphere which confers such a charm on the Russians. In a writer like Turgenev the poetry of spring breathes upon the rhapsodies of first love so consummately as to create a beautiful illusion of the beneficence of nature. It is this atmosphere of still and passionate delight, this tender music of pearly summer evenings on the steppes, that the Russians have made all their own.

Where Conrad's atmosphere does resemble that of the Russians is in its pervasive quality. It is not a series of crude, brilliant slashes, as it is, for instance, in some (though not all) of the work of Masefield, but it is an emotion sinking deep into the spirit of the book. It is, certainly, more marked in Conrad's earlier as compared to his later work, but it is always there as part of the whole substance of the story. I can explain more clearly what I mean by giving an illustration from Anatole France. In *Thaïs*, which is early, the atmosphere is rich, voluptuous, and glowing, in the Bergeret series, which is late, the atmosphere is subdued and subtle—but in each case it enters into the very core of the work. That is somewhat the difference between, say, the earliest novel of Conrad, *Almayer's Folly*, and the latest, *Chance*. In *Almayer's Folly* he may describe a river in this way :—

Over the low river-mist hiding the boat with its freight of young passionate life and all-forgetful happiness, the stars paled, and a silvery-grey tint crept over the sky from the eastward. There was not a breath of wind, not a rustle of stirring leaf, not a splash of leaping fish to disturb the

serene repose of all living things on the banks of the great river. Earth, river, and sky were wrapped up in a deep sleep, from which it seemed there would be no waking. All the seething life and movement of tropical nature seemed concentrated in the ardent eyes, in the tumultuously beating hearts of the two beings drifting in the canoe, under the white canopy of mist, over the smooth surface of the river.

Suddenly a great sheaf of yellow rays shot upwards from behind the black curtain of trees lining the banks of the Pantai. The stars went out ; the little black clouds at the zenith glowed for a moment with crimson tints, and the thick mist, stirred by the gentle breeze, the sigh of waking nature, whirled round and broke into fantastically torn pieces, disclosing the wrinkled surface of the river sparkling in the broad light of day. Great flocks of white birds wheeled screaming above the swaying tree-tops. The sun had risen on the east coast. (*Almayer's Folly*, pp. 94-5.)

and in *Chance* he may describe a river in this way :—

As often happens after a grey daybreak the sun had risen in a warm and glorious splendour above the smooth immense gleam of the enlarged estuary. Whisps of mist floated like trails of luminous dust, and in the dazzling reflections of water and vapour, the shores had the murky semi-transparent darkness of shadows cast mysteriously from below. Powell, who had sailed out of London all his young seaman's life told me that it was then, in a moment of entranced vision an hour or so after sunrise, that the river was revealed to him for all time, like a fair face often seen before, which is suddenly perceived to be the expression of an inner and unsuspected beauty, of that something unique and only its own which arouses a passion of wonder and fidelity and an unappeasable memory of its charm. The hull of the *Ferndale* swung head to the eastward, caught the light, her tall spars and rigging steeped in a path of red-gold, from the water-line full of glitter to the trucks slight and gleaming against the delicate expanse of blue. (*Chance*, p. 251.)

but in both these descriptions there is the typical atmosphere of the respective books, the atmosphere



illusive and universal which gives its special tone to the various stages of his work. For the difference between them is not simply that between north and south, between the Pantai and the Thames, it is the difference between Conrad's early and Conrad's late manner. I can only present it in concrete examples, of course—though with an atmosphere such as Conrad's a concrete example is but the visualisation of the whole spirit. For in Conrad's books atmosphere is always treated from the same standpoint, though it is developed in many different moods.

But there is one thing about Conrad which, I fancy, is universally admitted, and that is his power of building up the atmosphere of romance—a romance often tinged, as I say, with the hue of vain regret, of useless desire, and of defeated hope. It falls upon his characters and his scenes, it dyes his stories with the sadness of vanished youth. For it is romance alone that makes memory poignant. An air of expectancy hovers over his stories, but it is an expectancy that fades away into old age. For it is hope that is sweet but it is decay that is certain. As Conrad exclaims :—

Oh the glamour of youth ! Oh the fire of it, more dazzling than the flames of the burning ship, throwing a magic light on the wide earth, leaping audaciously to the sky, presently to be quenched by time, more cruel, more pitiless, more bitter than the sea—and like the flames of the burning ship surrounded by an impenetrable night. (*Youth*, "Youth," p. 33.)

But he can also create the more ordinary glamour of romantic adventure. There is plenty of it in "Youth," in "The Duel" in "A Smile of Fortune," but nowhere is it more sustained than in the novel

of *Romance*. In this book Conrad and Hueffer have achieved the very spirit of their title. It glitters with the romance of danger, of love, of youth, of intrigue. And it creates with rare depth of imagination the very soul of Spanish Cuba of a hundred years ago. Some of the descriptions in *Romance* are extremely fine. Here is one which has been truly called Dantesque :—

“I feel in me a greatness, an inspiration. . . .”

These were his last words. The heavy dark lashes descended slowly upon the faint gleam of the eyeballs, like a lowered curtain. The deep folds of the ravine gathered the falling dusk into great pools of absolute blackness at the foot of the crags.

Rising high above our littleness that watched, fascinated, the struggle of lights and shadows over the soul entangled in the wreck of a man's body, the rocks had a monumental indifference. And between their great stony faces, turning pale in the gloom, with the amazed peon as if standing guard, machete in hand, Manuel's greatness and his inspiration passed away without as much as an exhaled sigh. (*Romance*, pp. 365-6.)

Indeed, *Romance* is a book too often overlooked by students of Conrad.

I have said little or nothing about the other side of atmosphere—the unconscious and ceaseless manifestation of personality. And I have said little because, of course, the object of this whole book is to make that evident. Conrad has his flavour just as any other writer of any prominence has his. That it is visible in his conscious effects is naturally true, for such are the index to the inner self. And here are the chief points one may look for in Conrad's philosophy—romance tinged with the sense of fatalism and sadness, cynicism touched by a deep regard for the

qualities of simplicity and compassion. He is impatient of the futility of things, and fatalism is embedded in his theory of a pitiless scheme. And yet to all this is queerly joined a real zest for existence, and a sympathetic warmth for artless and beautiful lives. I feel inclined to say that to his general disillusionment about life there is added an almost naïve belief in goodness. It is in the rough seamen of the *Narcissus* or in the frail figure of a Mrs Gould that Conrad finds an antidote for his disgust at human folly.

And, arising out of this duality, we can notice in Conrad, overlaid, as it were, upon his pessimism, the strictest regard for integrity and an austere sense of honour. I do not mean that these things are necessarily antagonistic to a pessimistic conception of life, but I do mean that, in the way Conrad presents them, they might appear old fashioned to stupid persons. For, as I have stated previously, people in England expect original cleverness in their literary heroes—and expect it, I may add, even concerning the most straightforward emotions of life. They want mountebanks to tell them that their integrity is a subject for derision, or that their honour is, strictly speaking, dishonourable ; or else, they want some one who will for ever be drawing the shades finer and finer. The simplicity of a man like Conrad, a simplicity hiding an immense subtlety of perception, is not easily understood. But, in contrast to Conrad's wide tone of sceptical aloofness, it is a note the unexpectedness of which is sure to strike home to every reader.

But I will draw these rather desultory remarks on Conrad's atmosphere to a close. For I set out to do a thing which I find is beyond me. The secret of Conrad's atmosphere eludes me as a critic, though

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emotionally it is as clear as the day. That is one of the reasons why I have given so many extracts (though, of course, it is only the physical atmosphere that extracts adequately present)—because in them is demonstrated the very quality that escapes analysis. Moreover one cannot break up atmosphere into its component parts without destroying its magic. I can only point out again, what has been pointed out by so many other people, that atmosphere does exist potently in the very fibre of Conrad's books. It is this which, in its weakness alike as in its strength, gives to Conrad's work its chief claim to uniqueness.

## CHAPTER V

### CONRAD AS PSYCHOLOGIST

IN the two following chapters I mean to discuss some of the more prominent figures in Conrad's books—in the first of them the men ; in the second of them, the women. For, of course, that is the only satisfactory method of analysing the psychological powers of a novelist. A truism indeed ! But at the outset I propose to make a few remarks on Conrad's general conception of character and of his manner of approaching the subject. And first of all I would point out that nowhere more decisively than in his drawing of character does Conrad reveal his tremendous grip on reality. Not only are his people drawn with rare imagination, but with a ceaseless detail which is ever awake to uphold, like Atlas, the structure of his visionary world. It is the conjunction of these two diverse and necessary forces that gives the high actuality to his creations. Such realism knows nothing of the eccentric or typical view of character so common amongst our English writers. The fresh gusts of vivacity that are ceaselessly flowing from some novelists into their puppets may serve to entertain the reader enormously but are quite useless for the purpose of realism. The figures of Conrad live because the fires of their existence burn inwardly. They are projected once and for all from the mind of their author and thereafter they have no need to call upon him for help. They don't require bolstering up, so



to speak, by the sallies of their originator. That is the realistic gift—a thing as perfect in its illusion as is the perspective of a masterly painting. And no brilliance, no philosophic depth, no curious originality can take its place.

And the next point I would insist on is that, although Conrad's psychology is always sane and unjaundiced, yet, in his male characters especially, he does draw a type of mind to whom the domination of one idea has a terrible attraction. I need not cite examples at the moment, but I mention it here because it is a thing which shows clearly enough Conrad's theory of people as a whole. And his theory is, I think, that beneath the usual level of sanity and good will there is an immense under-world of darkness and unrest. Our healthiness is snatched fearfully out of the madness of nature. His philosophy of character is often optimistic, his philosophy of life invariably pessimistic.

And Conrad's view of character has, as I have pointed out elsewhere, an occasional touch of symbolism about it which is extraordinarily thrilling. But one must remember that it is thrilling simply because the symbolism does not swallow up the reality. Captain MacWhirr in "Typhoon" is a case in point. In my chapter on Conrad's atmosphere I speak of the excitement we experience when this stupid man faces with invulnerable endurance the fury of the storm. But the reason why he does interest one so intensely is just because he is a real person and not merely symbolic of man's fight with nature. I am a little afraid lest what I have said in the other chapter may be misunderstood. You see, there is this recondite duality in romantic minds, this capacity for creating one illusion within another. Captain MacWhirr is essentially real, but his reality

seems enhanced by his contact with the typhoon. That is Conrad's system of developing his characters. He likes to show us them battling with some definite catastrophe or idea. His people are faced with monstrous propositions. There is Lord Jim (*Lord Jim*) with his problem of how to redeem his honour, there is Charles Gould (*Nostramo*) enslaved to his silver mine, there is Almayer (*Almayer's Folly*) with his hope of riches, there is Mr Verloc (*The Secret Agent*) haunted by his own endless scheming, there is Lieutenant Feraud ("The Duel") obsessed by his duel, there is Razumov (*Under Western Eyes*) fighting his conscience, there is old de Barral (*Chance*) with his monomania of hatred and ill-usage. I need not prolong such a list: it is what I spoke of in my former paragraph—the power of the *idée fixe* over Conrad's male portraits. Not always, of course, but quite frequently, this is how Conrad works, and it has led to some talk of his not being so much a profound psychologist as a profound describer of moods. I do not think there is much in that, for it only represents the incapacity of most normal people to realise the might of even slightly abnormal obsessions and it shows also that they have not grasped how Conrad arrives at his conclusions. For he is not describing eccentric types, he is describing the victimisation of ordinary people by the madness of the world. Almost more than any other writer save Dostoievsky, has Conrad probed to its depths the duality of the mind. In my opinion he is truly one of the great imaginative creators. For me his portraits have an absorbing actuality. He builds up his figures by a hundred harmonious touches. Even assume that he is going to present us to a man driven by one mastering impulse—say Lord Jim. That does not prevent him very soon

making us comprehend Lord Jim quite apart from that impulse. For not only is Jim's treatment of his own obsession a key to his whole character, but, with the sure instinct of an artist, Conrad finishes him off completely—him and all his other people, indeed—their gestures, their scraps of dialogue. He reads them subjectively and objectively, he views them from all sorts of standpoints. His endeavour is to be universally consistent to reality. I do not say he is invariably successful—I do not think he is. I would not call such figures as Father Corbélán (*Nostromo*), or Gaspar Ruiz ("Gaspar Ruiz") or even Marlow himself ("Heart of Darkness," etc.) altogether successful—just to mention a few. But that is only to be expected, it happens to every creator. Look at the Bulgarian in Turgenev's *On the Eve*—what a piece of wood! But the answer to that is surely this—Look at Helena in the same book. And as to Conrad, I have only to say, look at so and so, and so and so—fifty figures!

That is the worst of it. There are so many characters of the finest distinction in Conrad's works that I have no space to deal at all adequately with more than a few of them. Or rather, it is true of his men—his women are comparatively few in number. And yet, in a sense, Conrad's male portraits require subtler handling than his female portraits. For his women are more direct than his men and the beautiful delicacy of their construction requires, for right understanding, only the talent of sympathy and observation, whereas some, at any rate, of his men are definitely obscure not, be it understood, in their psychology but in the reasons for their psychology. Male portraits, elaborate, singular, very distinctive, crowd these pages. In *Nostromo*, alone, there must be a

dozen figures of unique consequence. The minds of his chief men are unrolled before us with a wealth and fullness recalling the huge monologues of Browning. For instance *Lord Jim* is concerned, principally with one figure—Jim; and *Under Western Eyes* principally with one figure—Razumov.

But here let me point out a fundamental principle of Conrad's art. And it is a principle at once so alien to our English conception of the novel and so necessary in Conrad's conception of it that I must put it strongly. However important a character of Conrad's may be, that character is, nevertheless, subordinate to the unity of the book. Put thus it sounds neither a startling nor an unusual assertion but if the test be applied to the great characters of the great English novelists it would not stand. To take, what is perhaps an extreme example: Who ever thinks of Dickens' principal figures in relation to the plot? G. K. Chesterton knocks the nail on that head acutely in his *Charles Dickens*, when he says:—

Dickens' characters are perfect as long as he can keep them out of his stories (p. 148).

The truth is, that the unity of the novel is an idea that has been, with the exception of Henry James and George Moore (writers much under Continental influence), upheld by few English-speaking novelists before Conrad.

And I may add, further, that what most interests Conrad about people is, as a friend of mine calls it, "The changing complex of human relations," rather than the people as individuals. It is that, mainly, which differentiates his novels from the English novels of character. Just as he has the artistic

balance of his whole work before him in every sentence, so does he have the subtle grouping of all his characters before him in every one of their actions. The conflict of antagonistic or sympathetic natures is what really "intrigues" Conrad's imagination. That is why he is so fond of viewing his figures through the eyes of several different people, as in *Chance*, for instance (which almost follows the methods of *The Ring and the Book*), and of taking quite minor characters, such as the French officer in *Lord Jim* or the Brussels girl in "Heart of Darkness," and treating them as pivots on which he can turn his group of principal actors, thereby gaining new lights on them.

But, returning for an instant to what I was saying about Conrad's tendency to make his men subject to the fascination of an *idée fixe*, and to his view of nature as a mass of wild forces, one should note absolutely that Conrad, himself, is not under the *idée fixes* from which his characters suffer (as, for instance, is Tolstoy), nor are these characters of his at all insane (as, for instance, are the characters of Dostoievsky). To realise this truly is essential, because complete sanity is of the very nature of Conrad's genius. To say that his mental balance is unclouded is, after all, hardly more than to affirm that his psychology is rooted in reality. That seems obvious for, if it were not so, the obsessions of his people would not move us, they would only bewilder us. (I admit that Dostoievsky's characters move us—but then they are not all insane and such as are, are generally advancing out of or into insanity; they are still human). For though the dehumanised mind may be pathetic, it is actually without significance—it revolves in an unreal world. My meaning cannot be better



expressed than in the words of A. C. Bradley in his *Shakespearean Tragedy* :—

Shakespeare, occasionally and for reasons which need not be discussed here, represents abnormal conditions of mind ; insanity, for example, somnambulism, hallucinations. And deeds issuing from these are certainly not what are called deeds in the fullest sense, deeds expressive of character. . . . If Lear were really mad when he divided his kingdom, if Hamlet were really mad at any time in the story, they would cease to be tragic characters (pp. 13-4).

It is just the assurance we feel that Conrad's characters, in spite of all their *idée fixes*, in spite of the mad world around them, are real, suffering people, that gives the dignity of tragedy to his creations. ✓

I daresay I shall be accused here of manipulating the facts of the case to suit my contention—of proving black to be white, in simpler terms—but I am not conscious of so doing. If people say that I am raising a bother about nothing at all, that I am, in fact, creating a philosophy for Conrad that he never created for himself, it may be that they are right—it is their criticism against mine—but if they say that once having admitted that Conrad's characters are subject to *idée fixes* springing from contact with an essentially mad world, I must then admit, logically, that such characters are actually mad themselves, I altogether disagree. ✓ My whole contention is that, to Conrad, humanity is the one sane thing in the universe—I mean sane in the sense of having an ordered development and not a mere blind repetition. I own that in human beings the line where responsibility merges into sheer insanity may not be strictly discernible, but, all the same, it is quite plain when it has *not* been overstepped. In other words, we know perfectly well when eccentricity is *not* madness. And it is

with this knowledge one realises that none of Conrad's subjective characters even approach insanity. Furthermore (though this is not really germane to Conrad as it is to Shakespeare) we should remember that literary madness is very seldom real madness. But, indeed, in connection with the whole subject, one might well venture the remark that so transparently sane a man as Conrad could not, if he tried, treat insanity subjectively. Poor old Captain Hagberd in "To-morrow" (a man whose *idée fixe* has degenerated into true insanity) is viewed entirely objectively. He claims our pity because we see him through the eyes of the other actors, and consequently in focus with our world of ideas.

And just as one feels with entire certainty the sanity of men like Shakespeare and Conrad, so one feels doubtful about the sanity of men like Blake and Dostoievsky. Here, of course, I am on dangerous ground because, though the insanity of genius is so obviously a different thing from ordinary insanity, yet adverse critics will never admit that one is aware of that: but I bring it forward here to prove still more decisively the sanity of Conrad and his characters. You have only to study Blake's pictures or Dostoievsky's heroes to be convinced that there is something abnormal and disordered in their creators' minds. Blake is an extraordinarily dynamic artist and Dostoievsky the greatest novelist the world is ever likely to see, but I am quite sure that neither of them is sane in the sense that Conrad is sane—as sure as that their "insanity" is so subtle and indefinable that I will never be able to lay my finger on it.

But my opinion remains that, as I said before, Conrad views nature as a mad, incoherent jumble. ✓  
This philosophy of his is constantly peeping out both

✓ in his melancholy atmosphere and in the sombre delusions of his figures. Sanity to him lies deeper than the beautiful face of the external world. He is no George Meredith to be beguiled into worship of what is inevitable. His idea of nature is founded upon a conception of destiny more rebellious than that of Meredith, and not only more rebellious but more tragic. And yet I would not say that Meredith's and Conrad's views of nature are so far apart as might appear. No doubt Conrad too, would echo Meredith's line :—

Into the breast that gives the rose  
Shall I with shuddering fall ?

*(Ode to the Spirit of Earth in Autumn.)*

but then he would echo it because stoicism in regard to life must always be a quality of clear-headed thinkers. The rapture for Nature's loveliness is equally apparent in Meredith and in Conrad, but to one she is the fountain of man's sanity, whereas to the other she is the quagmire of man's unrest. I expect that I am putting the case crudely in my desire to make my point and my comparison, but I believe I have stated the general truth of the matter.

But Conrad's own grasp of character shows a sense of proportion of the most valuable description. It shows it in his avoidance of those extravagances that might tend to diminish the individual reality of his creations just as well as in the sensitive poise and balance of his atmosphere. I speak of his finest work. I admit that he can sometimes be extravagant but, even so, it is an extravagance that is never really bizarre. His extravagances are those of over-imagination and not those of false imagination. We seldom, if ever, feel that he has made a mistake in

psychology, though we feel, often enough, that he has gone beyond due limits in its presentation. And this frequently arises from the too rich colours of his atmosphere. In his later books, where his atmosphere is toned down very considerably, the false notes in Conrad—I mean the positive false notes—occur hardly at all.

And this suggests a fruitful topic—the influence of atmosphere on Conrad's figures. I have touched on this subject in the particular chapter that treats of Conrad's atmosphere and so I may, perhaps, be pardoned if I have to repeat myself. The truth is, Conrad's psychology is saturated in atmosphere and cannot very well be appreciated fully apart from it. It all hangs on what I was saying before—that Conrad's characters are as much a portion of an artistic whole (the story in which they appear) as they are individualities in themselves. I really do not see how that can be denied. His people take on, with artful gradations, the atmosphere of their surroundings. Indeed Conrad's chief aim is to pave the way for their reality by the creation of a tremendous and pervasive atmosphere. I mean by atmosphere (as much as anything else) that emotion which gives an undercurrent to the unity of a work of art. In this sense of the word his figures are obviously atmospheric.

And, furthermore, Conrad has an endless curiosity in regard to character. He is always experimenting. For instance, he takes a shipful of unsophisticated sailors in *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* and he confronts them with a knotty problem—the problem of the dying James Wait. What he wants to do is to discover the limits of their simplicity. The result is remarkable. The whole discipline of the ship is disintegrated because these seamen cannot understand

the officers' attitude towards the nigger and it even results in an attempted mutiny against men for whom they have a genuine regard.

Again, in *Lord Jim*, Conrad wants to find out what it is in man that makes him so often disregard the first law of his being—the law of self-preservation ; in other words, what bravery is. So, with his intense and apparently paradoxical curiosity, he burrows down into the secret places of the heart to analyse its converse—cowardice. Firstly, there is Jim, a man with a romantic vision of himself who must retain it or go under ; secondly, there is Brierly, a man with a professional pride, who must be at the top or nowhere ; thirdly, there is the French Lieutenant, a man with a spiritual sense of honour, who must keep it untarnished or cease to exist. Through comprehending what actual or possible cowardice means to these three men Conrad grasps the meaning of that elusive thing which is bravery and self-sacrifice.

Again, the question of obedience and discipline is one that has exercised Conrad much. He voices it in "Heart of Darkness" when Marlow asks himself why it was that the miserable, half-starved natives on the boat going up the Congo didn't simply eat the "pilgrims" and have done with it instead of obeying all their weary and senseless behests ; and he voices it, too (though this time merely by implication) in "The Secret Sharer" where the question arises, why did the sailors and officers obey the captain whom they were certain was mad and obey him not only in ordinary things but when it was obvious that his orders were likely to result in shipwreck ? And in both cases he is careful to cut from under our feet all the ordinary reasons—the natives were fond of human flesh, could easily have overpowered the "pilgrims," had no moral



scruples, could never have been caught, and, at any rate, could not have been worse off than they were; the sailors were not in the grip of habit (the captain was a new one), or impressed by his sense of superior knowledge (they had come to the conclusion that he was irresponsible), or frightened of the law (men about to drown don't care a jot for that). The truth is, in both these cases we are in the presence of the thing-in-itself—a very real and a very incomprehensible power.

Thus does Conrad probe into people's minds.

I often think that the wonderful reality of Conrad's main figures must come from the fact that the majority of them are either actual people or built up of characteristics belonging to people Conrad has met. For their reality has a photographic fidelity seen, as it were, through the rosy light of remembrance. They stand before us in the intimate silence of ghostly friends. So it appears to me at any rate. I seem to know the characters of Conrad's people in the same way as, shutting my eyes, I know the characters of people I am constantly meeting. This, I repeat, is an effect which one would suppose could only have been aroused by his people being drawn from genuine types—though I bear in mind the ability of atmosphere to create figures strongly and convincingly in accordance with the author's own predilections. And, indeed, one notices that Conrad (especially in his portraits of women) is more successful the nearer he approaches to what is apparently his ideal. Probably that is a trait one could observe in most novelists—though, assuredly, some can only achieve reality in minor types. Such writers are so taken up with describing the remarkable qualities of their favourites that their actuality is positively choked in the

process, and it is the lesser figures that emerge triumphant. But Conrad's realism mounts with his enthusiasm. In all his novels what women are dearer to him than Mrs Gould (*Nostromo*) and Winnie Verloc (*The Secret Agent*)?—and what women are more life-like?

The more I study Conrad's characters, men and women alike, the more astonished am I at the intuition and creative energy of their author. I think of a book like *Nostromo*, where a crowd of actors, defined and differentiated, passes ceaselessly before my eyes, or of a story like "The End of the Tether" where the few men on board the steamer are as alive to my intelligence as my closest friends, and I try to discover what I may call the intimate secret of their reality—that secret which yields so little to abstract explanation. And I believe the key to it all lies, fundamentally, in a sympathetic presentation. I do not mean in the least that even the majority of Conrad's people are particularly sympathetic either to Conrad or Conrad's readers, but what I do mean is that Conrad puts himself, his readers, and his characters on an identical level. One feels oneself on the same plane as Conrad, and one is sure also that Conrad feels himself on the same plane as his readers and his figures. No doubt this is mainly true of people who happen to find themselves sympathetic to Conrad's personality, but I think Conrad always tries to make that impression—for those who *are* in sympathy with Conrad are sympathetic in a very special sense.

And here I might say that what Conrad admires in character is more or less what every one admires whose mind is not given over to the false casuistry that lies behind so many modern revaluations. He admires courage, compassion, honour, endurance, and in the

ordinary interpretation that all sensible persons allow them. But, indeed, I cannot express Conrad's own views more justly than in his own words. In the introductory chapter to *Some Reminiscences* he remarks :—

Those who read me know my conviction that the world, the temporal world, rests on a few very simple ideas ; so simple that they must be as old as the hills. It rests notably, amongst others, on the idea of Fidelity. At a time when nothing which is not revolutionary in some way or other can expect to attract much attention I have not been revolutionary in my writings. The revolutionary spirit is mighty convenient in this, that it frees one from all scruples as regards ideas. Its hard, absolute optimism is repulsive to my mind by the menace of fanaticism and intolerance it contains. No doubt one should smile at these things ; but, imperfect Esthete, I am no better Philosopher. All claim to special righteousness awakens in me that scorn and anger from which a philosophical mind should be free. (*Some Reminiscences*, pp. 20-1.)

All Conrad's characters have, of course, some tinge of the complexion of Conrad's own personality. To deny that would be absurd—even a Blue Book has some sort of a tinge about it. And consequently, as with all writers, there are bound to be certain minds more in sympathy with his projections than others. It is a bond which has, directly, little to do with the characters themselves. But it is precisely on sympathies and antipathies of this subtle order that the ship of criticism gets wrecked. To many people the irony or the sombre romance of so much of Conrad's psychology is sure to give offence, just as to many it will be the very core of his achievement. For there are innumerable planes not only in people's outlook on life but actually in their realisation of personality. There are some, undoubtedly, who

would consider the compassionate and touching figures of Mrs Gould and Winnie Verloc as merely tiresome nonentities, just as some might suppose Tolstoy's Anna Karenina or Natasha Rostov to be merely profligate and troublesome fools. Well, let it be so. We know better. But, indeed, the "tinge" of an author goes still deeper. The creations of one mind may be presented without personal bias, but they must inevitably bear the impress of their creator. And that is where the difficulty of comparing one author to another is so evident—for how can one adjudicate on the clash of temperaments? True, the critic is only interested in the result, but that, again, arises from individual preference, and individual preference arises from natural sympathies or antipathies. I do not say that the wisest criticism has not stepped beyond this vicious circle to some extent, but I do say that the ideal critic has yet to be born.

But from my own point of view, which is sympathetic, I would say that Conrad's powers of psychology are impressive, because, putting aside all questions of temperament, his characters do convince us that they are generally unaware that they exist only as figments of one brain. I daresay this may appear a fanciful and silly remark, but I cannot help thinking that the reality of any figure is in inverse ratio to its obvious dependence on outside assistance—which may be direct, as in the case of those clever writers whose characters merely reflect them or their opposites, or which may be oblique as in the case of those ingenious people who float their characters along on the tides of coincidence or improbable adventure, but which, in either event, is ruinous to the principles of fictional reality. Only books that appear to write themselves, only characters that appear

to live naturally, can be truly effective. Here, no doubt, I am poaching on a subject developed in my chapter on Conrad's art, but I do so without regret. It is a point that has to be mentioned in this special connection.

Where Conrad fails most as a psychologist (I am not talking about his individual failures, you understand) is, I think, in a certain aristocratic disregard for universal types with a popular appeal. Not one of his figures is ever likely to be even so limited a household word as, say, are the figures of Flaubert's Madame Bovary or Turgenev's Bazarov. There is something secluded about Conrad's mind, something aloof, which prevents him creating, with the widest sympathy, a representative figure. Lord Jim (*Lord Jim*) is his nearest approach to such a person, but Lord Jim is far from being one of his really successful men. You have only to read Conrad to feel, at once, that he will never be popular in the sense that some of the greatest novelists are popular. It is not that he lacks fire, beauty, subtlety—he has them all in marvellous profusion—but it is, I think, that he lacks those tremendous personal feelings on elemental questions that lift the creations of the Russians to a pitch of epic grandeur.

The truth is, Conrad is more concerned with the life-blood of his characters than with placing them in effective positions. He is, of course, a very moving writer, but to be moving is not his primary aim. His primary aim is fidelity to his original conception. It is that which attracts his main attention, and it is that which, in its logical result, tends to alienate the popular sympathy. It is over such a point one realises Conrad's very real affinity with Flaubert. For Conrad's interest in the psychology of his figures has



a passionate intensity that disdains all meretricious aid in its development or exposure. His is the mind of the true artist, the mind that never flags in its profound effort to keep the illusion it has created in the very forefront of the picture. Nor does he, in his best work, as is so often charged against him, achieve his results by redundancy. Quite the reverse.

✓ He achieves them by restraint, imagination, tireless care. And in achieving them he is quite content to miss the more striking effects of others. Even in Conrad's earlier works, where the physical aspect of the tropics is thrust so stridently upon the screen, it would be a mistake not to see that this is largely a device for throwing into stronger relief the realism of the actors. I am not going so far as to say that Conrad has not often, very often, allowed his unrivalled powers of description to carry him away on the swell of their own music, but I am going to say that the unity of his work is for ever at the back of his mind and that this unity revolves, primarily, round the realism of his characters. If he has, as I have asserted elsewhere, "a passion for his theme," he has also a passionate regard for the nuances of psychology. He is the most incorruptible of artists in that he cannot be lured from his aim by the promise of a great reward—the reward of universal esteem.

✓ But notwithstanding all that I have said about Conrad's inherent incapacity to become widely appreciated, I want to insist plainly that he has, as very few other people have, the ability to make his characters thrilling. This, again, is a subject which I discuss elsewhere, so I will only mention here that by thrilling I imply something almost indescribable, something intimate, like the familiar excitement of a dream. Who, for example, could be more thrilling

in this strange way than Harry Hagberd ("Tomorrow"), Mr Kurtz ("Heart of Darkness"), or Falk ("Falk"), with the shuddering motion of his hands, "the vague stir of the passionate and meaningless gesture"?

For Conrad's psychology is not alone painstaking, it is enlivened throughout by flashes of high genius—by these sudden revealing glimpses that explain more than do fifty laborious pages. His imagination has an insight which seems to pierce beyond that conventional depth which so few writers in the world have ever passed. This is no exaggeration. Conrad's originality is of the order that goes straight to bed-rock instead of dispersing itself in a thousand curious fancies. That is why any one of his great figures is worth the whole gallery of a Bernard Shaw, and that is why almost any figure of a Bernard Shaw is more popular than the whole of Conrad. (And when I say "popular" I refer to another kind of popularity than I was referring to a moment ago—Shaw's figures are not popular in the same way that Tolstoy's are.)

And we should observe that Conrad's psychology is inductive, and that that is one of the reasons why its very unexpectedness is yet perfectly natural. It is just as in real life, where people we are intimately acquainted with will often surprise us but seldom greatly bewilder us, for the reason that their unlooked-for actions have, at base, a familiar aspect when we think them over. That is about the nearest we can get to understand anyone. For no one in real life has the freedom from complexity of characters in fiction. It is in the comprehension of this that Conrad proves himself the most realistic of novelists. For the deductive is the usual attitude assumed by

novelists, and the deductive has always the snare of simplicity.

And one must also remember that Conrad, from an artistic point of view, is at least as much interested in personality (which is the actual impression created by a figure on other people's minds), as in character (which is what a figure really is). The conception of personality is, of course, relative to the person who receives it, but character is absolute. Conrad's people affect different readers very differently and for this very reason. But all the same one can easily ascertain the author's own opinion (internal evidence shows it quite clearly, as a rule), and that is the one we will be safest in accepting.

✓ But to know Conrad's finest figures as they should be known you must have tasted romance. For that vague and secret murmur is in their hearts as surely as the murmur of the sea is in the heart of a shell. It invests them with a something that is more than charm—that something which is romance itself. Such people as Hermann's niece ("Falk") or Dain Maroola (*Almayer's Folly*) have no need to speak—we know their hidden and romantic hearts by intuition. Conrad can impart a wonderful, rich glow to his figures. And in that light they seem close to us, without a word being spoken. Of course, it is another manifestation of atmosphere, but it is not only atmosphere—it is romance as well. For Conrad ✓ is the most romantic of writers. And if romance or rather the early romantic manner—for a book like *Chance* is deeply romantic in another way—is now fading before a purer psychology (as it is in his later books), there will always be people like myself who believe that his psychology has never been truer than in the instinctive insight of his romantic portraits.

There is just one more thing I would like to emphasise about Conrad's psychology, and that is its modernity and the quality of its modernity. He has the Slav capacity for comprehending the minds of to-day without placing them, so to speak, in the problems of to-day. There is all the difference in the world. Writers like Ibsen and Strindberg perceive the unrest of the present, but they always seem to perceive it in a local setting. That, probably, is because they are really moralists at heart. But writers like Tolstoy and Dostoievsky read as fresh to-day as they did forty years ago—indeed, I have little doubt that they read fresher. And, as far as I can judge, the characters of a book like *Nostromo* or like *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* will always be modern. It is the characters of a book such as *Lord Jim*, where the moralist has got a good hold, that will become old-fashioned, as the people in the plays of Ibsen and Strindberg (and many more) are already becoming old-fashioned. Perennial youth belongs to the great imaginative artists, and to them alone.

So now I think I have covered most of the points that one has to remember in considering Conrad's men and women. I am conscious that I have not explained myself any too lucidly, and I am conscious, moreover, that I have dealt with some aspects that are more or less self-evident. But it is better to round the subject off. I need only add that this chapter can serve no purpose unless read in conjunction with the two that succeed it. The abstract views of a novelist may be interesting—must be interesting, one might say, in the case of a distinguished man—but they are not what we are really concerned with. What we are really concerned with is his power to "call spirits from the vasty deep."

## CHAPTER VI

### CONRAD'S MEN

I HAVE been making a list of the more important men in Conrad's books and I find that I have jotted down the names of about ninety individuals. I could continue it, no doubt, to one hundred and ninety—on each one of which something deserves to be said. But, of course, there is no room for that here, and I will have to content myself with picking and choosing. It is not satisfactory. Far from it. For even so I am compelled to avoid any real analysis. I am not exaggerating in the least if I say that I could write a book of five hundred pages on Conrad's men. And some one will do it one of these days. For in them is the richest mine of psychology that our generation has known. With their endless variety, with their exotic atmosphere, with their individuality of high romance and imagination, they have quite altered the face of modern literature.

And about Conrad's men as a class there is one thing that strikes me especially. Some of them are noble and some of them are vile, but all his men are *men*. They live in an actual world and not in a mere structure of fancy or conceit, they are faced with the problems of real life and not with the ridiculous problems that stand for life to a certain class of intellectual. Moreover, they are men in that their outlook is essentially male—the atmosphere of masculinity pervades Conrad's men convincingly. There is



no such thing as a sexless person in Conrad, although sex itself is almost always treated from its romantic side. Conrad never creates a man simply to mouth advanced opinions. He never does, partly because it would be abhorrent to him and partly because his men do not belong to cliques of this order. Whoever goes to Conrad's characters for pronouncements will come away disappointed. It is the problems of life that interest Conrad, not the problems of intellectualism.

But what one does see in Conrad's finest men is a certain rare sensitiveness that, in the complete masculinity of their characters, shows a graceful, feminine touch—the touch of pity, self-sacrifice, and unselfishness. Where Conrad reveals his really marvelous knowledge of the mental differences between men and women is just in these types in which the two sexes draw closer together. A man like Captain Anthony in *Chance* is as sensitive, as compassionate as a woman, but there is, at heart, nothing passive in him. He has the delicate temperament of a woman but he has the active temperament of a man. Indeed one can only call his feelings "feminine" because it is the word generally applied to such feelings—they are not feminine at all in the true meaning of the word. There is nothing remotely capricious about Captain Anthony. He is reasonable, so reasonable that he cannot bear to see suffering which he believes he can and ought to remedy. Captain Anthony is certainly one of the most attractive men in Conrad's books—an unusual type, but a perfectly real one—humble, chivalrous, extraordinarily vehement when once aroused. His is a nature capable of boundless pity, and consequently there is something bitterly tragic in the way in which he begins to realise

that what he believed to be irresistible—his capacity for suffering that others might not suffer—has its limitations: when he begins to see that all the might of his compassion is powerless to help Flora de Barral. (That it was a mistake softens for us the effect but does not alter the poignancy of the mood.)

Another of the finest men in Conrad's books is Captain Whalley in "The End of the Tether." His is the mute self-sacrifice of parental love—a sacrifice as complete, as utterly without alloy as that of Balzac's Père Goriot. In him, far more than in that other doting father, Almayer (of whom the words are spoken), is the true "anguish of paternity." No portrait in Conrad is more vivid than the portrait of Whalley, the big, dignified, silent sea-captain. After long years of prosperity we see him at last on board the *Sofala*, like a superb old animal surrounded by yapping dogs. The more he is insulted by the mean sneers and innuendoes of Massy or Sterne, the more he is bowed down by the horror of advancing blindness and by the great desolation of his lonely old age, the more does he retire into himself, thanking God for his happy life, thinking of his loved ones, with the image of his daughter ever nearest his heart. His steadfast love covers with a warm and passionate glow the thought of that little girl (no longer young to anyone but him) living her hard life in Australia. Captain Whalley's end is, of course, a tragic and terrible end, but there is something so touching and beautiful in the quality of his devotion that it illumines the whole story with the soft atmosphere of triumphant love.

And talking of Captain Whalley one may notice Conrad's admirable success in drawing old men. He has caught, better than anyone I know, the set attitude and the aloofness, that air of living

in the past, which is the very breath of old age. Consider such a figure as that of the Garibaldino, Viola, in *Nostromo*. He resembles a prodigious relic of a time that is already forgotten, dreaming amidst the crash of revolution of a greatness that has died out of the world. The majestic calmness of his bearing, the austerity of his manner, is broken now and again by a fit of petulance, as though he were suddenly to wake from his memories to the stupid inanities of the present. In the last few pages of *Nostromo*, in that terrible climax of old Viola's failing powers, we are told that his daughter Linda did not dare to look at him because he "filled her with an almost unbearable feeling of pity"; and I think that every reader must experience the same emotion. There is something about him then at once so august and so pitiful that it is heartbreaking to watch the flicker of his life. Do you remember how, after he had shot his future son-in-law, supposing him to be "Ramirez the vagabond," and Linda had suddenly laughed insanely in his face, "he joined her faintly in a deep-toned and distant echo of her peals"? That touch, especially, always seems to me strangely pathetic. However, I will speak no more of this poor old man, but will give the eloquent description of his death—a description taken from a long passage I have quoted fully in another chapter:—

Very upright, white-haired, leonine, heroic in his absorbed quietness, he felt in the pocket of his red shirt for the spectacles given him by Doña Emilia. He put them on. After a long period of immobility he opened the book, and from on high looked through the glasses at the small print in double columns. A rigid, stern expression settled upon his features with a slight frown, as if in response to some gloomy thought or unpleasant sensation. But he never detached his eyes

from the book while he swayed forward, gently, gradually, till his snow-white head rested upon the open pages. A wooden clock ticked methodically on the white-washed wall, and growing slowly cold the Garibaldino lay alone, rugged, undecayed, like an old oak uprooted by a treacherous gust of wind. (*Nostramo*, p. 479.)

Another old man whose portrait is extremely good is Don Balthasar Riego in *Romance*. He is simply aristocratic old age personified. He is as entirely out of the world as though he were dead. He lives in a mist of ancient courtesies and of memories of by-gone days. The present to him is as truly non-existent, in all the essentials of change and activity, as his illusionary world is real and important. In the mumblings of his weary voice a whole vanished order seems to live again.

✓ And Captain Beard in "Youth" gives us the sense of age very strongly. He is a great figure in his dogged resolve to bring his first command safe to her destination. But he is seen through the cruel and romantic eyes of youth as a little old man who can actually fall asleep on the deck of his burning vessel. It is fond recollection, alone, which yields to him the grand aspect of hardihood and resolve. Captain Beard is a personality appearing before us in the subdued twilight of old age and of long subordination.

And finally, in this connection, let me call your attention to Singleton (*The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*), the old sailor of the *Narcissus*. He is truly a magnificent survival of the sea—a figure of epic size and compass, typifying with his aged, vacant mind and his habits of endurance and sagacity the very life of the ocean and of its voyagers. Singleton is a symbolic figure. He represents the eternal conflict of man and the elements. He is as immortal as the sea itself—as

immortal, as empty, and as inscrutably wise. There are two descriptions of him in the earlier pages of *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* which I shall quote here:—

Singleton stood at the door with his face to the light and his back to the darkness. And alone in the dim emptiness of the sleeping forecastle he appeared bigger, colossal, very old; old as Father Time himself, who should have come there into this place as quiet as a sepulchre to contemplate with patient eyes the short victory of sleep, the consoler. Yet he was only a child of time, a lonely relic of a devoured and forgotten generation. He stood, still strong, as ever unthinking; a ready man with a vast empty past and with no future, with his childlike impulses and his man's passions already dead within his tattooed breast (*The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* pp. 33-4.)

Till then he had been standing meditative and unthinking, reposeful and hopeless, with a face grim and blank—a sixty-year-old child of the mysterious sea. The thoughts of all his lifetime could have been expressed in six words, but the stir of those things that were as much part of his existence as his beating heart called up a gleam of alert understanding upon the sternness of his aged face (*The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* p. 36.)

The sea is, indeed, a strong agency in moulding the characters of many of Conrad's men. For its vigour enters into nearly all his books. The finest and the most typical men in Conrad's stories are seamen. It is a life that appeals to him through the qualities of courage, simplicity, and realism that it engenders. His true seamen are mostly men of character. There are exceptions, of course, but the exceptions seem to belong to a different breed. We feel, for instance, that Donkin (*The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*) is really a cockney guttersnipe, that the second mate of the *Nan Shan* ("Typhoon") is really a hopeless beachcomber, that Massy ("The End of the Tether") is



really a gambler fallen into the wrong place. It is curious that Conrad should have left particularly expressive portraits of these men. Just let me repeat what he says of Donkin :—

He stood with arms akimbo, a little fellow with white eyelashes. He looked as if he had known all the degradations and all the furies. He looked as if he had been cuffed, kicked, rolled in the mud ; he looked as if he had been scratched, spat upon, pelted with unmentionable filth . . . and he smiled with a sense of security at the faces around. His ears were bending down under the weight of his battered hard hat. The torn tails of his black coat flapped in fringes about the calves of his legs. He unbuttoned the only two buttons that remained and every one saw he had no shirt under it. It was his deserved misfortune that those rags which nobody could possibly be supposed to own looked on him as if they had been stolen. His neck was long and thin ; his eyelids were red ; rare hairs hung about his jaws ; his shoulders were peaked and drooped like the broken wings of a bird ; all his left side was caked with mud which showed that he had lately slept in a wet ditch. (*The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* p. 11.)

And here is what he says of the second mate in "Typhoon" :—

With his sharp nose, red at the tip, and his thin pinched lips, he always looked as though he were raging inwardly ; and he was concise in his speech to the point of rudeness. All his time off duty he spent in his cabin with the door shut, keeping so still in there that he was supposed to fall asleep as soon as he had disappeared ; but the man who came in to wake him for his watch on deck would invariably find him with his eyes wide open, flat on his back in the bunk, and glaring irritably from a soiled pillow. He never wrote any letters, did not seem to hope for news from anywhere ; and though he had been heard once to mention West Hartlepool, it was with extreme bitterness, and only in connection with the extortionate charges of a boarding-house. He was one of those men who are picked up at need in the ports of the

world. They are competent enough, appear hopelessly hard up, show no evidence of any sort of vice, and carry about them all the signs of manifest failure. They come on board on an emergency, care for no ship afloat, live in their own atmosphere of casual connection amongst their ship-mates, who know nothing of them, and make up their minds to leave at inconvenient times. They clear out with no words of leave-taking in some God-forsaken port other men would fear to be stranded in, and go ashore in company of a shabby sea-chest, corded like a treasure-box, and with an air of shaking the ship's dust off their feet. (*Typhoon*, "Typhoon," p. 31.)

I have given these two rather long extracts, partly to prove my contention that Conrad's bad seamen are not really seamen at all, but mainly to give examples of his graphic power of throwing a picture before our eyes. He creates his first impression of a figure at one touch, although the total impression is developed psychologically through the slow process of accumulative effect. I speak of his principal figures—there are others that live almost entirely in the physical glimpses we obtain of them.

But to return to what I was saying—the sea, as I have remarked, has a profound influence on the lives of many of Conrad's men. It seems to enter into their fibre with the dim romance, with the incorruptible directness of its appeal. His true seamen are often childish, generally stupid in a worldly sense, and invariably artless. But their very immorality speaks of the healthiness of their minds, and their courage is a second nature to them. It is to them that Conrad turns joyfully from the feverish complexities of more intellectual types. One notices that again and again. And when he does draw a man of character who is a seaman, he draws the man, whom, of all others, he admires the most. But it is in describing quite

plain seamen that Conrad's humour is most evident. There is no irony in his pictures of men like Franklin (*Chance*), Baker, Creighton, Captain Allistoun (*The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*), Burns ("A Smile of Fortune"), Mahon ("Youth"), and many another of their kidney—at least no irony that is not essentially kind-hearted. For to Conrad they are the really trustworthy and sincere men, these wandering sailors to whom the work of each day is the main problem of existence.

But I do not want to raise the impression that Conrad has a stereotyped build of sailor that he duplicates from book to book. That is untrue, although I would admit readily enough that he is apt to give the seamen who play a more secondary part in his stories a rather similar point of view. But it is because they have all been salted with the same arduous life. No, Conrad, who, as I pointed out in the previous chapter, has a passion for developing his personalities, creates for us the reality of each seaman, as of each other figure, with authentic effect. For instance, one may affirm that a certain romantic light covers, alike, all the seamen and the officers aboard the *Narcissus*—but where could one find a greater capacity for managing a crowd so that each member stood out as individual, as unforgettable as do the separate figures of the most powerful groups of sculpture? Think of Donkin and Wait, of Singleton and Podmore, of "Belfast" and Wamibo, and of the three officers I mentioned above, and you realise at once the supreme mastery of Conrad's method.

Let me speak more particularly of one of these men—of James Wait, "the nigger of the *Narcissus*." This picture of a dying man, supported in his horrible fear of death by the shadowy splendour of his own presence

and by a sort of spurious dignity, is subtle and grimly pathetic. Wait has the arrogant superiority of an educated negro, and the sly cunning of a primeval race. He knows to the very last ounce how to make his own disease the object of pity and concession, and yet in making it he is terrified by the thought of extinction. He has a lofty grandeur of manner which is particularly disconcerting, but it mingles, fantastically, with the whining of a slave. There is a thumbnail description of him at the outset of the book which is very striking :—

He held his head up in the glare of the lamp—a head vigorously modelled into deep shadows and shining lights—a head powerful and misshapen with a tormented and flattened face—a face pathetic and brutal : the tragic, the mysterious, the repulsive mask of a nigger's soul. (*The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* p. 24.)

As I am speaking here of the negro it might be as well if I said something now of Conrad's pictures of other non-European peoples. The East Indies have, of course, yielded him the fierce Malays and warlike races of those half-savage islands. Such men as Babalatchi (*An Outcast of the Islands* and *Almayer's Folly*), Dain Maroola (*Almayer's Folly*), Arsat ("The Lagoon"), Karain ("Karain"), Doramin and Dain Waris (*Lord Jim*), are representative types of East Indian dwellers. In considering such men Conrad neither dehumanises nor Europeanises the Oriental mind. It is true that they are swayed, as are all men, by love and hatred, by happiness and misery, by success and failure, but, with it all, they remain still in the twilight of certain preconceived ideas—their horizons seem to us bounded by the things which are merely part of our emotions. And they have a world of their own, hidden from our understanding—the

world of savage fears and beliefs that, in the excess of any excitement, may swamp that other world in which they think and act so much like ourselves. It is this alien and yet human mind which, as the foundation to all Eastern personality, Conrad portrays which such curious fidelity and insight.

And Conrad understands the wild melancholy, the despairing resignation of the savage heart. In the overwhelming atmosphere of his tropical forests, the fatalistic spirit of the wilderness and the blind and patient silence of the woods seem to find their echo in the hearts of the aboriginal tribes. Such stories as "An Outpost of Progress" and "Heart of Darkness" resemble a vast cry of anguish and bewilderment. The whole sadness and dark unrest of savage minds—I mean the minds of real, untutored savages—is, as it were, summed up in these tremendous words from "Heart of Darkness":—

A great silence around and above. Perhaps on some quiet night the tremor of far-off drums, sinking, swelling, a tremor vast, faint; a sound weird, appealing, suggestive, and wild—and perhaps with as profound a meaning as the sound of bells in a Christian country. (*Youth*, "Heart of Darkness," p. 80.)

And Conrad can impart to his Easterns the high dignity of an ancient race. The Abdulla of *Almayer's Folly* passes onward in his career of deception and faith with the slow and measured step of a True Believer. In him is the very essence of Arab courtesy—the courtesy that hides the pliant subtlety of the Eastern mind but which knows no relaxation throughout life. And what natural dignity there is, too, in such a man as Doramin (*Lord Jim*). They are aristocrats, these Eastern chiefs and traders of Conrad's books.

And let us glance now at a white man of the East



—at Jim, the principal figure in *Lord Jim*. In my previous chapter I mentioned a tendency in Conrad to make his men subject to the influence of an *idée fixe*, and I mentioned also that it was difficult to see the foundations for the psychology of some of them. Jim seems to me a case in point of both these things. It is hard to perceive precisely why Conrad should have made him take his dishonouring misfortune with such extreme and relentless despair, but it is certainly true that he does become the victim of an *idée fixe*—the *idée fixe* of recovering his honour. I cannot quite agree that Jim is as true to life as Conrad intended him to be—I can scarcely believe that a man of his rather ordinary calibre (for he is not a clever man) and his robust health would not have adjusted his outlook, after a time, to a more bearable view of life. Of course, we have to remember that Jim's character (as apart from his intellect) is a very unusual one, a character full of dramatic possibilities and an almost morbid craving to distinguish itself; but I think we must see that nature (for he had health and youth on his side) would have healed his wound in spite of himself. Whether he had wanted to or no he would have lived down his disgrace, just as one lives down the agony of unrequited love, of remorse, and of death itself—though I am not saying that disgrace may not be the worst evil of all. Conrad had to make Jim such as he is because the story demanded it, but, though there may be exceptions in which a picture like his may be true, they must be very rare. Indeed, Jim will only appear fully credible to us if we assume that he is not an Englishman at all but a passionate and melancholy Pole. Perhaps that is the way we should consider him. An Englishman would have gone about for a few years with a

hang-dog look and would then have put his back into some solid work and have forgotten all about it, but a Pole would brood for ever on his lost honour. The unfortunate thing is that Jim is presented as an Englishman, and we are compelled to criticise him as such. But what Conrad does succeed in suggesting with great ability is the tiny, rotten spot in Jim's personality—the little canker which undermines the whole of his life, which keeps him inevitably from the healthiness of true sanity. It is, perhaps, just because Jim realises his own character so clearly that his conflict with himself assumes these almost epic proportions—and in that light he becomes a much more real individual. But I cannot help thinking that Conrad was developing one of his own theories in Jim's case—the theory that (as the French Lieutenant says on p. 157) "ah ça!"—meaning, of course, that when honour is gone life is no longer worth living. I call that a theory of Conrad's because he holds it in an especially French sense—a sense absolute, drastic, exalted. It is a thing one constantly notices throughout his books, and, as much as anything else does, it shows the foreign blood in Conrad. I feel all through *Lord Jim* that though Conrad regards Jim with pity, yet he regards him without hope. But our comfortable English minds would always hold out hope, or, in their more modern manifestations, would probably deny that dishonour, itself, was anything more than an antiquated shibboleth.

And now, while I am discussing Jim, it is a good opportunity to discuss Jim's friend, Marlow. Marlow appears not only in *Lord Jim*, but also in "Youth," in "Heart of Darkness," and in *Chance*. He is, as I have explained in another chapter, the sort of

familiar ghost of Conrad. But though he echoes Conrad in many respects, in others he is totally different. For he is not only a philosopher as is Conrad (and a philosopher with much the same philosophy), but he is also a moralist, in a sense in which Conrad decidedly is not. To tell the truth, Marlow is one of the few bores in Conrad. I think it quite likely that it is because we see Jim almost entirely through his eyes that Jim does not greatly move us—the irritation of Marlow's endless comments spoiling our finer appreciation of the other's character. In *Lord Jim* Marlow makes his worst and longest appearance, whereas in "Youth" he makes by far his best. For in "Youth" he speaks with a lyrical fervour which is marvellously beautiful. In "Heart of Darkness," too, he is impressive though long-winded, and in *Chance* he plays but a subsidiary part. On the whole, the creation of Marlow would seem a mistake, though I admit his use. His is the wisdom of experience, a wisdom void of illusions but cherishing still the might and glory of their charm. For at heart Marlow, with all his cynicism and sober melancholy, is a true sentimentalist.

Of other white men living in out-of-the-way corners of Africa or the East Indies, Conrad has drawn many portraits. There are Kayerts and Carlier, the two foolish and inexperienced white agents of "An Outpost of Progress," the two men who begin with every good resolution and who end with every evil passion, the two men who are victims to the spirit of the wilderness. And there are all the white men of "Heart of Darkness"—the manager with his stony face and his more stony heart, the "pilgrims" with their greed, their shameless lust for ivory, their lost souls, and, most important of all, the extra-

ordinary Kurtz—a man of intellect, of eloquence, of imagination, and a man who has been utterly enslaved by the mad darkness of a god-forsaken land. There is no doubt that there is an abominable depth of degradation about Kurtz, that there is something unspeakable about his surrender to base instincts and depraved delights, but somehow I can stand him better than I can stand his envious and criminal associates. He, at any rate, is not there solely for ivory.

And there is Falk ("Falk"), a strange figure, a man repulsive and pathetic, a man throbbing with life and unable to express himself, a man solitary, self-centred, and romantic in spite of himself. To understand Falk we must realise that he stands for the *male*. That is his whole meaning, in his love and in his desire for life—and that is his attraction for the girl. And there is Stein in *Lord Jim*, whose distinction and wise tolerance strike one at first glance, and whose picture is perhaps the finest in the whole novel. Stein is, indeed, one of Conrad's most remarkable figures—a man of sensitiveness, of discernment, and of genuine ability. One can almost see him in his shaded study, surrounded by his books and his splendid entomological collections, or walking slowly with a candle through the shadowy gloom of his empty reception chambers, or sitting in the deep solitude of his great garden. He is a living figure, a figure of romantic adventure and of absorbed solitude, a figure from the dim, savage past of a vanished epoch.

And there is Captain Lingard of *An Outcast of the Islands*, a bluff, domineering, tender-hearted old seaman, overwhelming in his affection and terrible in his revenge. His end is clouded in sadness and uncertainty. He melts away, a ruined and broken old man, into the haze of Europe, and is heard of no

more. And there is Willems in the same book, the conceited and fraudulent clerk, whom Captain Lingard has "made" and whom he rescues in the hour of his exposure. Willems belongs to the large class of utterly unmoral people whose only creed is their personal advantage. That he should behave treacherously to Captain Lingard is to be expected but that he should be capable of really passionate love is harder to credit. His love for Aïssa is like the craving of a madman and into it he pours all the pent up forces of his selfish energy. The study of Willems is successful because Conrad makes us see exactly the type of man he is, but it is, I think, exaggerated in parts and it is too drawn out. But in *An Outcast of the Islands* and *Almayer's Folly* the most important man to appear in both is Almayer, himself—the fountain of Conrad's inspiration (see *Some Reminiscences*, p. 156). He is the white trader of Sambir, the slave of hope, the weary, weak, and sullen *protégé* of Captain Lingard. (Curious it is to note the likeness, in their great dissimilarity (the one selfish, the other selfless), 'twixt Almayer and the Markelov of Turgenev's *On the Eve*—drenched as they both are in futile irritability). Almayer is the sort of man whose spirit, always peevish, has been fatally ruined by the monotony and dreariness of a tropical life. His hate and his love alike are tinged with unreal sentiment and his whole outlook is vitiated by his sense of wrongs and by his dreams of felicity. He is a fit subject for an *idée fixe*, a man without any grip on reality, a man incapable of a magnanimous view. Neither Almayer nor Willems are precisely what we mean by bad men but they are, in the truest sense of the word, worthless. Almayer stagnates and Willems pushes, but the world cold-shoulders them equally.



And there is Captain MacWhirr of the *Nan Shan* ("Typhoon"), of whom I have had cause to speak in other chapters. It is this densely stupid man, with no qualifications to attract us but his dogged courage and his sense of duty, that Conrad has chosen to exemplify most strikingly his admiration for fidelity and endurance. The reason for that is obvious—the greater the contrast, the stronger the point. But I do wish to insist again that Captain MacWhirr is, above all things, a real man—if it were not so the story would lose its power. His figure rises before us as vividly as any figure in these books, the figure of an entirely proper and utterly unimaginative man, the sort of man whose mind is perfectly literal and who is enclosed in a wooden box of convention.

And there is Jacobus ("A Smile of Fortune"), that curious ships'-dealer of Mauritius, a figure sinister and pitiable, a man of overpowering greed and of odd, compassionate impulses, a man who lives in a world of muffled innuendo and of clouded emotions. Certainly Jacobus is a fascinating study. But he rouses an interest that is doomed to perpetual disappointment, because it really is impossible to grasp his motives. The only thing that can be definitely stated is that he is a more reputable figure than his respected brother.

And then finally (to close this haphazard list) there are Jasper Allen and the Dutch Lieutenant Heemskirk in "*Freya of the Seven Islands*." Jasper is one of Conrad's fine figures of a man—clean-cut throughout, a capital and enthusiastic seaman, a man whose simple and straightforward nature has been fired with the passionate romance of a great love. His devotion to Freya is as much part of his existence as the very beat of his heart, and the tragic gloom of this story

is darkened by the dreadful collapse of all his active faculties in the shock of irretrievable disaster. Unless we realise clearly that beneath that blow his sanity has actually given way we cannot but rebel against the last stages of his psychology. But, indeed, the truth is that when Heemskirk managed to run the *Bonito* on a reef, something vital snapped within the taut and eager brain of Jasper Allen. And as for Heemskirk himself I am inclined to think he is the vilest man in all Conrad—a blackguard as heartless as Iago. The very thought of him makes the gorge rise with an intolerable loathing. From jealousy and outraged dignity he wrecked the lives of two happy lovers with no more compunction than he would have felt in squashing a fly—indeed, with fiendish and oily pleasure. The soul of Heemskirk is one of unmitigated darkness.

And now let me speak of some of the characters in *Nostramo*—the greatest romance of the Western world ever written. I have already mentioned old Viola, the Garibaldino, but he is only one out of a crowd of enthralling people. For not only in its general atmosphere but in the very characters that pass through its pages, *Nostramo* is the most imaginative and original of all Conrad's books. There is, for instance, Charles Gould, the husband of Doña Emilia and the owner of the San Tomé concession. Outwardly taciturn, inwardly consumed by a passionate hatred of inefficiency, this silent man, so English amidst the excitable Costaguanos and yet so subtly a Costaguano himself, pursues his aim with the rigid inevitability of a fanatic. And, indeed, he is a fanatic, a man of one idea, a man intrepid, dangerous, incapable of turning back. His treatment of his wife is, of course, an integral part of his whole character—she is the slow victim of his consuming idea.

And then there is Nostromo (Gian' Battista, Captain Fidanza), a man with a genius for initiative and command, a man craving for the narrow romance of perpetual success and perpetual recognition, a man of strength and courage but of morbid sensibility, always brooding over imaginary slights, a man with a grievance which he could hardly have expressed in words but which leads him into deception and dishonour, a man of the people truly, but a man with an aristocratic aloofness of heart. I used to think that Nostromo was not a success but I now think quite otherwise. He is, perhaps, the one man of real genius in all Conrad's books. For he has the type of personality that amounts to genius. And, indeed, his grasp of a situation and his capacity for carrying out a scheme have genius in them. His whole actions during the revolution show an extraordinarily quick and fertile brain. Not only did he deal efficiently with the silver but it was really at his suggestion that Dr Monygham carried out the brilliant idea of making Sotillo drag for it in the bay—wasting precious time in the one manner that could have appeared genuine to that rapacious and gloomy ruffian. And then, again, his ride across country to warn Barrios was a feat of genius. But the gnawing worm of discontent follows hard upon these immense material successes. Unable to extract the last ounce of recognition—the delicate flattery of unqualified fame—he feels all the bitterness of failure. He has got nothing out of it, nothing at all, neither glory nor money! Such thoughts open the path to his decline and fall. Brooding upon the injustice of society, upon their capacity to take all his abilities, his achievements, and his integrity as a matter of course, he comes to the slow conclusion that he will

revenge himself by never revealing the fact that the silver is not really at the bottom of the sea, but hidden deep within the shelving sand of the Great Isabel—never revealing the fact but using his own knowledge to grow rich by stealth. Like Charles Gould, he, too, is the victim of an *idée fixe*. But our last glimpses of Nostromo are lighted for us by another flash of his former genius—the procuring of old Viola and his two daughters as keepers of the new lighthouse upon the Great Isabel. Betrothed to one daughter and secretly in love with the other, he can come there in future without comment—come to that lonely island on the border of the Placid Gulf, and abstract, one by one, the precious and haunting ingots of silver. Let me finish these words about Nostromo by giving this striking portrait of him :—

Nostromo woke up from a fourteen hours' sleep, and arose full length from his lair in the long grass. He stood knee deep amongst the whispering undulations of the green blades with the lost air of a man just born into the world. Handsome, robust, and supple, he threw back his head, flung his arms open, and stretched himself with a slow twist of the waist and a leisurely growling yawn of white teeth, as natural and free from evil in the moment of waking as a magnificent and unconscious wild beast. Then, in the suddenly steadied glance fixed upon nothing from under a forced frown, appeared the man. (*Nostromo*, p. 347.)

And another very curious character is that of Dr Monygham. He is one of these strange men who have drifted through every form of bitter degradation into a hopeless view of life, relieved only from despair by cynical hatred of his fellow-men. His atrocious sufferings under Guzman Bento, wherein in a moment of tortured weakness he has revealed the secrets which mean disaster and death to his friends, have



filled his heart with an utter abasement of misery. He is like a lost soul wandering in the torments of hell. The biting sarcasm of his words conceals an agony of useless repentance. For Dr Monygham is a man whose nobility of spirit has suffered an outrage from which it cannot recover of its own accord. He is a man who has lost all belief in himself. There is nothing more touching in Conrad than the way in which Mrs Gould realises this in the exquisite tenderness of her compassion, and the way in which Dr Monygham repays her by his pure devotion. To this outcast she has brought back the very breath of life.

Decoud, the Parisian mocker, the airy lover of Antonio Avellanos, the *flaneur* of the Boulevards, is another interesting study. It is not quite apparent, I think, what final impression of him Conrad means us to retain, but I should say it was the impression of a sincere patriot, who, like so many patriots, only half believes that there is anything in it all. He is the type of universal scoffer whose feelings are stronger than the reason which opposes them. His death on the Great Isabel is certainly one of the most thrilling passages in *Nostramo*. The psychology it reveals is marvellously subtle. The demoralising, mysterious effect of silence and insomnia has never before been presented with such intolerable power.

And then there is Captain Mitchell—the pompous, ineffectual, and lovable old port Captain of the O.S.N. at Sulaco. His is a character of guileless and upright simplicity—a character of the most absorbed self-importance and the most unconditional belief in authority. He is serenely ignorant of the real world, living, as he does, in a realm of pleasant illusions, but in his consequential fussiness and in his garrulous



good-nature he is a genuine character. Moreover, he has the qualities of personal courage and of faithfulness to a marked degree.

And there is Don José Avellanos—the stately and aristocratic patriot of the old *régime*, a figure tragic in his unswerving idealism amidst the memories of suffering and the horrors of present disaster. There is something at once splendid and melancholy in the picture of this disinterested old man, struggling to keep alive his belief in the ultimate regeneration of his country through the blind chaos that seems to have swamped his life's work at the very hour of its triumph.

And one of the most singular and vivid people in this book is Sotillo, the Colonel of the Esmeralda regiment, and a leader of the Montero revolution. In him is epitomised that spirit of cowardice, greed, and ruthless cruelty underlying a certain type of semi-educated South American. He has the soul of all the furies, pent up for most of his career beneath the languishing and irresistible exterior of a notorious lady-killer but let loose at last in an appalling avalanche of vicious cupidity and savage anger. The picture in which Conrad describes the shocking blackness of his heart is so striking that I will give it here though it is part of a longer passage I have quoted elsewhere :—

Every time he went in and came out with a slam of the door, the sentry on the landing presented arms, and got in return a black, venomous, unsteady glance, which, in reality, saw nothing at all, being merely the reflection of the soul within—a soul of gloomy hatred, irresolution, avarice, and fury. (*Nostromo*, p. 381.)

Another monster is General Montero, brother of the great “deliverer,” and, like him, devoid of anything but a brutal lust for power and an inordinate

vanity. Even while he is still supposed to belong to the Ribiera faction he shows all the storm signals of untrustworthiness and sullen contempt. This is how he appeared at the banquet to celebrate the building of the railway :—

On one side, General Montero, his bald head covered now by a plumed cocked hat, remained motionless on a skylight seat, a pair of big gauntleted hands folded on the hilt of the sabre standing upright between his legs. The white plume, the coppery tint of his broad face, the blue-black of the moustaches under the curved beak, the mass of gold on sleeves and breast, the high shining boots with enormous spurs, the working nostrils, the imbecile and domineering stare of the glorious victor of Rio Seco had in them something ominous and incredible ; the exaggeration of the cruel caricature, the fatuity of solemn masquerading, the atrocious grotesqueness of some military idol of Aztec conception and European bedecking, awaiting the homage of worshippers. (*Nostromo*, p. 103.)

There are several other men in *Nostromo* of whom I should like to speak had I the space—Hirsch, for instance, (whose terror always strikes me as rather too melodramatic), and Ribiera, the President-Dictator, a hero in an infirm body, and Barrios, the rough diamond, and Don Pépé, the old brave, and Father Corbélan (too melodramatic, also, I think), and the infamous Guzman Bento—who appears only as a memory and who is a sort of Dr Francia, without Francia's charm of manner. Yet I must pass them by with only a mention of their names.

But I will turn now to another book of Conrad's that contains some exceptionally interesting people—*The Secret Agent*. And in regard to this book, it is necessary to note, as I have pointed out in my chapter on Conrad's irony, that the whole work is conceived in a spirit of irony. It does not affect the reality of

the figures, nor does it affect the feelings, whether of dislike or of pity, with which we regard them, but it does affect our perspective. This is a point to be remembered.

The principal character in *The Secret Agent* (and one of the most perfect characters in Conrad) is a woman, Winnie Verloc, and as such she does not enter into present consideration, but her brother Stevie, and her husband, Mr Verloc, are, next to her, of chief interest. Stevie is a young man, slightly "wanting" mentally, but overflowing with compassion for suffering and full of a gentle pride in the integrity of all "good" people—a simple, unsophisticated nature, but capable of paroxysms of rage against cruelty or oppression and of a curiously stubborn resistance to the wiles of remonstrance or inquisitiveness. A very marked sympathy and intuition have been lavished on Stevie's portrait—and lavished, I should suspect, not alone for his sake but for the sake of making us comprehend the relationship of Stevie and his sister. For her devotion to him is that of a boundless maternal pity for the innocent helplessness of a child, and in that emotion we see him as he really is—the pathetic fragment of a beautiful and trusting nature. For Stevie's mind is only warped in its lack of growth, it is not warped at all in any quality of true humanity. Its secretiveness and its openness alike represent the temperament of a sensitive boy.

Verloc, on the other hand, though not a vicious man, is a man almost entirely lacking in morality. His theory of life is contained in the word comfort—comfort of mind and body. And the tragedy of his life is the impossibility of attaining this tantalising goal for any length of time. He is one of these sublimely slothful men who would be delighted just to live and

let live—provided he were well paid for it. Though no men could be more different than Nostromo and Verloc, yet they resemble one another in the single point that they both have a dumb grievance against society—for whom they have done so much and from whom they have received so little. (And, talking of comparisons, it is rather odd to contrast Jacobus of “A Smile of Fortune” with Verloc. They have a sort of external resemblance in their mumbling and secretive natures, though they are not, really, at all alike.) In the thick darkness of his muddled intelligence Verloc is for ever (since his meeting with the deadly Mr Vladimir) brooding upon his wrongs. That is why, throughout the book, we watch him through a kind of veil—the veil of his own bewildered uneasiness. But physically he is quite plain to us—an obese man, dirty, unkempt, solemnly unobservant, fond of his home, much moved at the thought of his own worth. Conrad has given an inimitable description of him :—

His eyes were naturally heavy ; he had an air of having wallowed, fully dressed, all day on an unmade bed. (*The Secret Agent*, p. 3.)

[What a master Conrad is of these thumb-nail pictures ! Think of his description of the small, skulking second mate of the “Nan Shan” :—

The second mate was lying low, like a malignant little animal under a hedge. (*Typhoon*, “Typhoon,” p. 65.)

or of what he says of Dr Monygham :—

. . . whose short, hopeless laugh expressed somehow an immense mistrust of mankind. (*Nostromo*, p. 36.)

or, again, of what he says of Councillor Mikulin :—

The bearded bureaucrat sat at his post, mysteriously self-

possessed like an idol with dim, unreadable eyes. (*Under Western Eyes*, p. 93.)]

The anarchists of *The Secret Agent*, such men as Michaelis, Ossipon, Carl Yundt, and the Professor, make a curious group, posed as they are in the ironic gravity of Conrad's setting. (One should contrast them, by the way, to Inspector Heat, the absolute type of the corrupt, competent, non-commissioned mind—a mind, in this instance, with something in it of Hugo's Javert and something of the contemptuous licence and sheer pride of the subordinate.) Michaelis is the most pleasant of them—a man whose vitality has all oozed away into fat, an amiable sentimentalist of the universal brotherhood order. Ossipon is simply a fraud, and Karl Yundt a "horrid old man," but the Professor is really formidable—a man of one idea indeed, a fanatic untouched by compassion or doubt, an extremist who believes in destruction simply for itself. The little picture of him, which makes the last paragraph of *The Secret Agent*, sums up the whole philosophy of his life with striking effect:—

And the incorruptible Professor walked too, averting his eyes from the odious multitude of mankind. He had no future. He disdained it. He was a force. His thoughts caressed the images of ruin and destruction. He walked frail, insignificant, shabby, miserable—and terrible in the simplicity of his idea calling madness and despair to the regeneration of the world. Nobody looked at him. He passed on unsuspected and deadly, like a pest in the street full of men. (*The Secret Agent*, pp. 441-2.)

And we may glance now at the men in that other novel about rebels—*Under Western Eyes*. The book centres round the figure of Razumov, and it is of him we must speak first of all. This, really, is a study of



despair, for to understand Razumov one must realise the angry futility in his heart against all mankind and his constant savage efforts to justify his own actions to himself by considering the ruin that others have brought into his blameless life. Razumov is an egoist—his one aim is to make a success of his career; and he is also fanatically averse to the fanaticism of extremists. His silence, which won for him the unenviable esteem of the idealist Haldin, is the cloak under which he hides his disdain and his ambition. But Razumov (like the Raskolnikof of *Crime and Punishment*) is more within the grip of his moral conscience than he knows himself, and therefore, though he can behave basely in the hour of panic (as he does in his betrayal of Haldin), yet he is bound to suffer for it a hundredfold later on. As a matter of fact the angry gnawing of his conscience never leaves him by night or day—he tries to stifle it by ceaseless explanations, by cynical contempt, by a view of society foreign to his Russian soul, but he cannot. There is no doubt that it would shortly have driven him mad—especially under the fearful strain of Haldin's sister's exalted regard for her brother's last protector and friend—had he not burst out of his nightmare of silence into the relief and ignominy of confession. For Razumov has the endless introspection of the Slav. It is typical of him that he does not confess till all chances of his being unmasked are over, for it is typical of a certain order of Russians to lie while people suspect them but to tell the truth when they are no longer doubted. The power of this portrait rests in the fact that Razumov is, at once, convincing as an individual and convincing as a Russian.

The other men in *Under Western Eyes* need not

detain us long. The most interesting of them are, perhaps, Councillor Mikulin of the secret police, the revolutionary Haldin, and Peter Ivanovitch, the escaped convict and great pioneer of feminism. Mikulin is exciting because he represents the inscrutable attitude of Russian officialdom, and is, himself, the embodiment of cunning reserve and deep perspicuity. In reading of his interview with Razumov we are forcibly reminded of Raskolnikof's interviews with Porphyrius, the examining magistrate, in *Crime and Punishment*. We feel in both cases something uneasy and thrilling, something that seems to lie just beneath the smooth surface of the spoken words.

As for Haldin, his is the spirit of noble, disinterested, and perhaps fanatical idealism. I say "perhaps" because, though he murders a high official, the few glimpses we have of him give suggestion of a sweet and reasonable nature driven to desperation by the suffering around him. Haldin is the true type of martyr—gentle, faithful, uncomplaining. With his hands still red he first steps before us. But his simple and winning nature disarms with a word our horror at a useless and dreadful deed.

As for Peter Ivanovitch, he is a veritable whited sepulchre—a man with a vast flow of words and an extreme smallness of heart—a booming and hollow drum. Nowhere does the underlying irony of this book appear more clearly than in the suggestion of Peter Ivanovitch's influence over the sincerest of the revolutionaries. For the curse of advanced causes is the power of words. The prestige of Peter Ivanovitch is, apart from his Siberian escape, built up upon a mountain of sound. In reality he is a mean, a cruel, and a grossly conceited man.

I have not yet mentioned some of the most finished portraits in Conrad's books—such portraits as those of D'Hubert and Feraud in "The Duel," Il Conde in "Il Conde," Dominic and Cesar (both admittedly real) in *The Mirror of the Sea*, Conrad's own uncle in *Some Reminiscences*, Captain Hagberd and his son Harry in "To-morrow," O'Brien, Manuel del Popolo and Tomas Castro in *Romance*, the Duc de Mersch in *The Inheritors*.

I do not know how to describe Lieutenant (afterwards General) D'Hubert better than by saying that he is a kind of French Captain Anthony of the Napoleonic wars. He has the sane, sensitive, and compassionate gallantry of the English sea captain—a just and delightful personality. And Feraud, too, has charm—the charm of a fiery and irascible Gascon, whose true spirit has been oppressed by rancour and misfortune. The contrast between these two men gives us a brilliant picture of either. They have our affection because they are really presented sympathetically.

Il Conde, too, is presented sympathetically, though perhaps with a touch of irony. He comes before us a rather faded, rather solitary old man who has passed graciously through life an eternal gentleman and an eternal *dilettanté*. We see him at the moment of his deepest perplexity and disturbance, quite unable to cope with his difficulty but remaining, as ever, a gentleman to his finger tips. Il Conde is the portrait of a man whose only aim in life is to slip peacefully downhill, indulging a little his cultured and mature tastes, and treating the world with the benign friendliness of a philosopher. There is a tragic touch in this story but it moves us only faintly—as indeed Il Conde, himself, would wish. Strong

feelings would be out of place in regard to this refined and undemonstrative old aristocrat.

As to Dominic, Cesar, and Conrad's own uncle, I will say but little of them as they hardly fall into my present scheme. They are characters clearly and, in regard to two of them, lovingly drawn, and they stand out of the pages as living people. Conrad's uncle, particularly, must have been a man in a thousand—so warm-hearted, wide-minded, and comprehending.

Of Captain Hagberd I have spoken elsewhere. He is a man who creates in us an emotion of true pity—though he himself, of course, is radiantly happy with the hopeful certainty of an insane obsession. But if his illusion is tragic to us, his rare and fleeting moments of doubt are still more tragic. That is what Bessie Carvil knew when she set herself, in her pity, to pacify the old man with a semblance of belief and interest. In Captain Hagberd Conrad has drawn, with great skill, the curious undercurrent of misgiving and shyness which lurks behind nearly every form of delusion.

Harry Hagberd, his son, is a figure startling not only in the absolute contrast he presents to his father but in the strange glamour of his own personality. It is not without significance that he should appear out of the dusk of the night and should melt into it again to the mysterious sound of the swell breaking on the sea wall. He reminds me somehow of a very different person, of Balzac's *Vautrin*. Both have that fascination of a strange, gigantic, and symbolic personality—a personality shrouded, as it were, in a conspiracy of silence and romance. That both have a certain melodramatic touch about them I admit—but then I doubt whether

one could conceive of them at all without melodrama.

O'Brien is a revolutionary Irishman who has fastened upon Cuba and has wormed his way to the top. It is a portrait with some curious, vivid touches and some obvious and romantic extravagances.

Manuel del Popolo is a Cuban Lugareno of the lowest type—with the soul of a beast, a demagogue, and a poet. The vagaries of his conceit and the fluctuations of his wicked and impressible heart are portrayed, as it were, through a golden flood of atmosphere. He lives for us in the setting of a tropical and lazy existence—and that setting is the secret of his vitality. But in it he is astonishingly real.

But perhaps Tomas Castro is the most triumphant creation of *Romance*. This stumpy, saturnine, and dignified little man has the very instinct of Spanish pride in the reserve of his bearing. He is a quite amazing figure—with his humanity peeping out of his contempt, and his sufferings wringing from him the bitter confession of defeat.

About the Duc de Mersch I will only say that he is probably the most successful figure in that not very successful book, *The Inheritors*. He has a certain reality and a certain presence, but I should doubt whether Conrad had very much to do with his creation.

In thinking of the men in Conrad's books I cannot help being struck at the insight and patience with which he develops quite secondary characters. Conrad sees his people too clearly for his pictures ever to be slovenly. Just think, for instance, of men like the French naval lieutenant in *Lord Jim*, or of the cabman in *The Secret Agent*. How plainly, how dramatically they rise before us—and how incidentally.



Some of the men in Conrad's stories whom one would have to call minor are complete through and through. There is Sterne in "The End of the Tether," that nasty, pushing, plausible scoundrel, that man without the glimmer of conscience but without any ill-will apart from what touches his own fortune; there is the Captain of the *Patna*, hideous in his gross and abounding vitality; [do you remember this inimitable description of him near the beginning of the book? :—

His skipper had come up noiselessly, in pyjamas with his sleeping-jacket flung wide open. Red of face, only half awake, the left eye partly closed, the right staring stupid and glassy, he hung his big head over the chart and scratched his ribs sleepily. There was something obscene in the sight of his naked flesh. His bared breast glistened soft and greasy as though he had sweated out his fat in his sleep. He pronounced a professional remark in a voice harsh and dead, resembling the rasping sound of a wood-file on the edge of a plank; the fold of his double chin hung like a bag triced up close under the hinge of his jaw. (*Lord Jim*, p. 20-1);

there is Brown in *Lord Jim*, the freebooter with his malicious and evil passions; there is Julius Laspara in *Under Western Eyes*, a man resembling some kind of ape; there is Makola in "An Outpost of Progress," so respectable, so deeply cynical, and so terrified of devils. However, I will not continue a list which might cover pages. I only wish to demonstrate the range and quality of Conrad's psychology. I do not mean at all that he is equally successful in all his figures, nor, in fact, that there are not positive failures amongst them, but I do mean that in each one of his figures there is a similar intensity of effort. Conrad's whole idea of the unity of the novel would demand that, quite apart from his scrupulous observance of reality. It is easy to find fault with Conrad's figures, to pick holes in their

psychology ; but, indeed, as a creator rather than a mere observer Conrad must have laid himself particularly open to such attack. A creator like Conrad will always arouse undue antipathy, and perhaps undue praise, whereas an observer like Jane Austen may be universally accepted.

In this chapter I have tried solely to present Conrad's men as they present themselves to me. I daresay it is a biased view but I believe it is, in the main, a right one. Of course, as I have said before, one cannot follow out the individual psychology in the way one should. One has to give alone a general impression—that general impression which can only be gained, I may add, from a minute study.

And my general impression is simply this—that Conrad is a very great psychologist. I admit that there is a good deal of melodrama in his earlier portraits, and a good deal of unnecessary irony in his later portraits, but the essentials of psychology—the realism, the creation, the detail, the comprehension—are always there. And after all, such melodrama as Conrad's is but the overflow of romance, and such irony as Conrad's is but the wisdom of experience. Perfect balance is seldom indicative of the highest originality. Though Conrad may do injustice to some types, yet to others he has given a reality which can never fade. His intolerance of certain people is the meed of his appreciation of others. We should remember these words of his about Dr Monygham :—

What he lacked was the polished callousness of men of the world, the callousness from which springs an easy tolerance for oneself and others ; the tolerance wide as poles asunder from true sympathy and human compassion. (*Nostromo*, p. 441.)

## CHAPTER VII

### CONRAD'S WOMEN

To say, as it is sometimes said, that Conrad does not understand women is an observation revealing blindness. For, indeed, his women portraits are the most finished, delicate, and poignant of all his portraits. But the reason for its being said arises, probably, from the fact that Conrad does not make love the centre theme of all his stories and from the fact that his finest women are *good* women. They are of the charming and merciful order of Desdemona rather than of the ardent and fiery order of Cleopatra. Of course, I do not mean that they are insipid—his great women figures have a marvellous and thrilling reality—but what I do mean is that they are not romantically inconstant, even if by that one merely implies that they are not instinctively passionate. For in the rarest and most exalted women the emotion of love is not only steadfast but it is maternal. It is just that, I think, which gives such pathetic beauty to the portraits of Mrs Gould in *Nostromo* and of Winnie Verloc in *The Secret Agent*—portraits of which we must always speak first in considering Conrad's female characters. To Mrs Gould her husband has still something in him of a little boy, to Winnie Verloc her brother is always a little boy. In these childless women the might of their compassionate love has wrapped the husband and the brother in the invincible bonds

of a maternal affection. They belong to the very choicest natures—the natures of devotion, singleness of heart, and exquisite sensitiveness of perception. And what is so wonderful about them both is their stillness. Mrs Gould seems to spread the light of her benign understanding over all the darkness of *Nostramo*, whereas Winnie Verloc concentrates the force of her protecting love upon Stevie alone, but in both cases the effect of stillness is the same. It is “the wisdom of the heart.” One cannot exactly compare Mrs Gould and Winnie Verloc, it is true, for they are quite distinct, and moreover Conrad has subtly suggested in their portraits the difference between a refined and educated lady and an ignorant woman of the people, but one sees in them, very touchingly, the common basis of a great love and a deep pity. The words in which Conrad describes Mrs Gould can be used absolutely of them both :—

It must not be supposed that Mrs Gould’s mind was masculine. A woman with a masculine mind is not a being of superior efficiency ; she is simply a phenomenon of imperfect differentiation—interestingly barren and without importance. Doña Emilia’s intelligence being feminine led her to achieve the conquest of Sulaco, simply by lighting the way for her unselfishness and sympathy. She could converse charmingly, but she was not talkative. The wisdom of the heart having no concern with the erection or demolition of theories any more than with the defence of prejudices, has no random words at its command. The words it pronounces have the value of acts of integrity, tolerance, and compassion. A woman’s true tenderness, like the true virility of man, is expressed in action of a conquering kind. (*Nostramo*, p. 55.)

It is because they are feminine in this still and perfect sense that the outrage to their love harrows us so acutely. For it is precisely this touch of femininity that gives the real beauty to their faithfulness

and compassion—and femininity is always maternal in its instincts of unselfishness and protection. But, as I say, one can only compare to a slight extent Mrs Gould and Winnie Verloc; and therefore I will consider them separately.

And first to speak of Mrs Gould, "first lady of Sulaco," wife of the celebrated Charles Gould, and "rich beyond the dreams of avarice." What one notices about her at once is the atmosphere of intuitive understanding that seems to flow from her into the very heart of that strange society. She is one of those people who by the absolute power of tact and sympathy can touch all that is best in others. Not a hint of the ironic is to be found in Mrs Gould's compassion. It is the chief cause of her influence. There is something profoundly beautiful in the way in which, by the sincere gentleness of her pity, she heals the withered heart of Dr Monygham. And it is to her alone that Nostromo is willing to reveal the baleful secret of the hidden silver. In fact, she is universally beloved because, in the deep wisdom of her femininity, she has the precious gifts of unselfishness, of dignity, and of pity. There is a magnetic attraction about Mrs. Gould. She inspires faith in goodness. And yet she is one of the most pathetic figures in all literature. If Balzac had been a greater artist in words no doubt he would have made Père Goriot extraordinarily pathetic, but, as it is, there is not the sustained finish about his portrait that there is about Mrs Gould's. I consider that this capacity for creating a quite beautiful and tender figure, who passes through the book radiating gentleness and understanding upon all the blind prejudice of life, reveals a very noble talent. In some respects Isabel Archer of *The Portrait of a Lady* is a similar type. But there



are lapses in Henry James' portrait, moments when he seems to nod (not in his style—he never nods there—but in his psychology) ; whereas Conrad's portrait of Mrs Gould is invariably fresh and exact. It is when Henry James is at his best that his Isabel Archer reminds me so strongly of Mrs Gould. Is there anything more heartbreaking in literature than that scene when Isabel Archer is sitting by the side of the dying Ralph Touchett, trying to tell him all her unhappiness, unburdening her heart at last in the bitter grief and solemn gladness of their parting. It is at such a moment, I repeat, that Isabel Archer reminds me of Mrs Gould. For there is, indeed, something intensely tragic about Mrs Gould. She is not only powerless to avert the great sorrow of her life—the slow fading of Charles Gould's love—but she is at last, this fragile and pathetic figure, invaded by the poison of doubt. She who has succoured every one, is unable to succour herself, is filled in her loneliness by an awful misgiving as to her own power. As Conrad says, towards the end of the book :—

Mrs Gould leaned back in the shade of the big trees planted in a circle. She leaned back with her eyes closed and her white hands lying idle on the arms of her seat. The half-light under the thick mass of leaves brought out the youthful prettiness of her face ; made the clear light fabrics and white lace of her dress appear luminous. Small and dainty, as if radiating a light of her own in the deep shade of the interlaced boughs, she resembled a good fairy, weary with a long career of well-doing, touched by the withering suspicion of the uselessness of her labours, the powerlessness of her magic. (*Nostramo*, p. 442.)

But even the bitterness of lost hope can but scratch the surface of her compassion, and that is why I am unable to believe that she would ever have used these

words of biting cynicism to the fair Giselle, which Conrad puts into her mouth. I quote the scene here, not because it is striking in itself but because it seems to me the one false touch in this most beautiful of portraits :—

“ Console yourself, child. Very soon he would have forgotten you for his treasure.”

“ Señora, he loved me. He loved me,” Giselle whispered, despairingly. “ He loved me as no one had ever been loved before.”

“ I have been loved too,” Mrs Gould said in a severe tone. (*Nostromo*, p. 476.)

As Conrad remarks, it was “ the first and only moment of cynical bitterness in her life ”—but all the same I cannot bring myself to believe that she could have had such a moment : not even when I remember that she had just come from a last talk with Nostromo (Giselle’s lover, wounded to death) about the silver—the silver that had wrecked his life and had wrecked hers—the accursed silver of the mine. No, Mrs Gould has cast her spell over me as she did, all unwittingly, over the characters in *Nostromo*, and I decline to believe that a word of cynicism ever escaped her lips. Her compassion was too genuine for her to have loosed from her heart the secret of her own unhappiness. As I said before, she is still—very still. She suffers deep within herself, keeping to the world her air of gentle wisdom and sympathy. It was Dr Monygham alone, who, in his unbounded reverence for her, guessed all the darkness of her secret.

Now let us look at Winnie Verloc. It is easier, in a sense, to fathom her character than to fathom Mrs Gould’s character, because it is concentrated in the one devouring passion of her maternal love for her brother. Winnie Verloc is tragic in the terrible

directness and intensity of her devotion—tragic, I mean, quite apart from the fate overhanging her and her beloved. She lives only for Stevie, she has married for him, she has sacrificed everything for his happiness. She is not like Mrs Gould, spreading around her the instinctive and magnetic power of her sympathy, for she exists entirely in this one passion of her laborious and secluded days. She suppresses herself for Stevie ; she does not expand with the natural warmth of Mrs Gould. One of the truest touches about her is this suggestion of a reserve force of fierce passion and *abandon*. We are told that she never allowed herself to think of Comrade Ossipon—the man secretly attractive to her. Everything seems to be contained in that—a whole underworld of emotion damned by her pure and selfless love for the half-witted Stevie. Winnie Verloc is quite unconscious of herself ; her love is the natural outpouring of her compassion, a real maternal affection derived from the years when, as a little girl, she protected a still smaller brother from the brutal onslaughts of their father. And in this conception of Winnie Verloc one seems to see her physically from Conrad's description just as clearly as one sees Mrs Gould—the one dark, of a full build, with a steadfast expression, the other very fair, very slight, and with a face of active and tactful sympathy—so alike, somehow, in all their dissimilarity. And Winnie Verloc is still—even stiller than Mrs Gould—contained, wordless, not given to worrying over a world that 'didn't "bear looking into." Hers is the tragedy of a sublime self-suppression. That is why the breaking-down of her fortifications is so sudden and dreadful. She is a pent-up river, and in the shocking outrage to her love she loses the one thing that held her to conventional ties. The frenzy of Winnie

Verloc's last hours is not alone terrible it is absolutely natural—as natural as Lear's frenzy. By losing Stevie she has not only lost all, but she has suffered an unspeakable injury. It is as though the heavens had fallen on her in the mad deluge of a final reckoning.

But what we must specially bear in mind both in regard to Mrs Gould and Winnie Verloc and, indeed, in regard to Conrad's other principal figures, is their inner reality—a reality, as it were, rooted in their very fibres. I emphasise this obvious point simply because one cannot demonstrate it by examples. And, after all, it is the one thing that actually makes them important. On the puppets of a novelist every other gift may be showered profusely and yet they may remain as uninteresting as stones. For it is only when they have breath in them that the words which describe their qualities take on a hue of colour. Mrs Gould is affecting because she is so entirely human in her compassionate philosophy, Winnie Verloc is tragic because her devotion has the unconscious grandeur of a real woman's lack of an ordered sense of proportion.

In the gallery of Conrad's finest women a number of faces come before me. I see Winnie Verloc's mother, a grotesque figure, but with a heart of gold—moving in the very strength of her humility and unselfishness. We do not even know her name—she is just Winnie Verloc's mother. Can this be a subtle touch, suggesting the utter effacement of her brave spirit? But whether intentional or not it heightens the impression of her character. And I see the statuesque Antonia Avellanos, the Spanish foil to the English Mrs Gould in *Nostromo*. Her stillness is more the immobility of a proud and exalted spirit than the simple "wisdom of the heart" which made Mrs Gould so worshipped.



And I see Nathalie Haldin (*Under Western Eyes*) young, enthusiastic, full of high and shining thoughts, capable of devotion and suffering, and I see her mother, an unconsolated and tragic figure waiting in vain for the return of her son. The picture of this bereaved mother is one of the most piteous things in Conrad :—

Away from the lamp, in the deeper dusk of the distant end, the profile of Mrs Haldin, her hands, her whole figure had the stillness of a sombre painting. Miss Haldin stopped, and pointed mournfully at the tragic immobility of her mother, who seemed to watch a beloved head lying in her lap. (*Under Western Eyes*, p. 350.)

And in the same book, *Under Western Eyes*, I see the incorruptible, unworldly-wise, and fanatical Sophia Antonovna, and Tekla, the despised slave of freedom, whose tender pity for the outcast and the unfortunate, softens into loving devotion the eccentricity of her character. And looking at Tekla I remember a figure somewhat like hers—the figure of Amy Foster (“Amy Foster”). There, too, you see a woman ennobled by pity, so ennobled that her whole nature seems to flower before your eyes. But Amy Foster has not the steadfast philosophy behind her compassionate devotion which enables Tekla to survive all the disillusionments of life—she is like a dumb creature unable to control her likes and fears. And of the same breed is Bessie Carvil (“To-morrow”), a true figure of tragedy. The whispers of romance and love sigh in her ear for a second and are gone for ever into the darkness of a night without hope. Her unsleeping care of her loathsome and tyrannical father show the full sweep of feminine renunciation, and her friendship with old Hagberd is touching in its abiding gentleness, in its delicate regard for the



sensitiveness of an insane old man. But it is the adventurer Harry Hagberd, that lover of all pretty women, who with a word can pluck the very heart out of her body. Again, the tragedy of repression!

Another of Conrad's most moving figures is that of Freya Nielsen ("Freya of the Seven Islands"). Hers is a character of loyal and confident goodness, a staunch, straightforward, joyous character, sure of itself and of its powers. Her love for Jasper Allen is without alloy and just sufficiently domineering to be maternal, but she has to manœuvre to gain her end with her old father. And it is in this manœuvring that she ruins not only her own life but her lover's as well. In this story of simplicity and deception there shows up something of the real, dark hand of fate. I cannot quite accept the later psychology of Freya Nielsen. Would such strength of character, such utter reliability, such resource, have collapsed so completely without a struggle? And when at last she heard from her father of Jasper's desperate condition would she not have gone to him—she who had been planning to elope with him—in spite of all? I think there is a certain error in accepting the developments of her psychology unless one admits that fate does play tricks that can stagger even the constancy of a faithful heart.

And one feels, to begin with, somewhat of the same misgiving, too, about Cornelius' daughter in *Lord Jim*. Would this true companion to Jim have failed, so tragically, to forgive him in the end? One has to remember, of course, that she lacks all the subtlety of education, of experience, of knowledge of the world—but love generally supplies a profound, intuitive grasp of character. But in this case, although one has doubts at first, one comes to see, I think, that

Conrad's psychology is quite right. To an untutored mind like hers no act of reparation could pardon the callous treachery of this last desertion. (For such it must inevitably have appeared to her.) The concrete intelligence of primitive woman has little to do with the endless niceties of personal honour. Cornelius' daughter is the sort of woman who would never be comforted, and who, in her dumb misery, would revenge herself upon the memory of her faithless lover. Such women will forgive anything save an offence against their loyalty.

The character of Flora de Barral in *Chance*, which I will now discuss, is a far more intricate one. This is amongst Conrad's greatest, although not amongst his most sympathetic, creations. (The real beauty of her mind is a thing developed, as it were, outside the story.) For her nature has been embittered as a girl, embittered by brutality, by poverty, by neglect ; and through nearly all the book we see her under the cloud of her suffering pride. It was this starved unhappiness that roused in Captain Anthony the chivalrous torrent of his pity. One feels that Flora de Barral has been warped and stunted in her mind—she has been so misused that she has ceased not alone to believe in, but almost to realise, such a thing as sympathetic kindness. That is why one understands so clearly that, though she is a woman in years, she is no more than a bewildered (and often disagreeable) child in feeling. It needed the rare compassion of a Captain Anthony to thrust aside the barriers of her mis-shapen intelligence and to read aright the miserable story of her life.

And while we are discussing Flora de Barral we may consider her friend and protector Mrs Fyne. Conrad knew what he was about when he drew Mrs Fyne.

Scarcely ever has his touch been surer. For Mrs Fyne is the epitome of the commonplace mind (in its strong form), with all its sterling merits and all its limitations. To Flora de Barral she is kindness itself up to a point and she even comprehends her up to a point; but she is fatally wanting in imagination. Just so far, and no further, can she go. Few psychologists would have had the courage to make her veer round so abruptly in her opinion of Flora de Barral. It is Conrad, with his precise knowledge of the heart, who realises that a woman like Mrs Fyne can be truly compassionate as long as her conventionality is not shocked, but that she can be hard and unforgiving outside those limits.

But, to return for a minute to more amiable types, we may consider another of Conrad's mysteriously attractive women—Hermann's niece in "Falk." She does very little throughout the story, but she dominates the scene at last by the sheer splendour of her physical attractions and the tranquil gentleness of her pity. She is a curiously alluring figure because there is something exciting and touching about her immobility. Falk, that lover of life, felt her spell upon him as an agonising fever. And, indeed, she is a very syren of attraction—an unconscious syren. She is as much the typical female as Falk is the typical male. There is, in particular, one splendid description of her which I will give here:—

The girl alone in the cabin sat sewing at some distance from the table. Falk stopped short in the doorway. Without a word, without a sign, without the slightest inclination of his bony head, by the silent intensity of his look alone, he seemed to lay his herculean frame at her feet. Her hands sank slowly on her lap, and raising her clear eyes, she let her soft, beaming glance enfold him from head to foot like a slow and pale caress. He was very hot when he sat down; she,

with bowed head, went on with her sewing ; her neck was very white under the light of the lamp ; but Falk, hiding his face in the palms of his hands, shuddered faintly. (*Typhoon*, "Falk," pp. 236-7.)

She is strong because she is all unconscious of her strength. And it is that, in *Nostromo*, which renders the fair Giselle so much more fatal than the dark Linda, her sister. Giselle Viola, sitting always with downcast eyes, silently absorbed, secretly stealing away Nostromo's heart, resembles a lovely and deadly flower. The sleepy luxuriance of her triumph is hardly more to her than the yawn of a playful panther. But against that yielding softness the passionate love of the dark Linda counts for nothing. In the seductive innocence of her nature the fair Giselle has the charm of centuries of experience.

Something of the same should, perhaps, be said of Nina Almayer (*Almayer's Folly*), of Aïssa (*An Outcast of the Islands*), of Alice Jacobus ("A Smile of Fortune"), and even of that very shadowy lady, Miss Etchingham Granger (*The Inheritors*). Nina Almayer is certainly unconscious of her attraction for Dain Maroola, though she yields to love with the *abandon* of her wild and passionate nature. The glamour of mysterious romance hangs over Nina Almayer almost more than over any other character in Conrad. This girl, forsaking her white father to fly across the sea with her dark lover, suggests the very call of the wilderness in her blood. The fierce tenderness of her love throws a wonderful and reviving freshness across the sombre gloom of Sambir and over the weariness of her own past existence. It is interesting to note how the power of her white blood gives her an immensely greater attraction for us than a figure like Aïssa—a woman equally passionate and untamed.



For Aïssa, too, is unconscious of her might, though, as soon as it arouses response in the breast of Willems, she uses it with all her barbaric cunning. As for Alice Jacobus (an even more desolate figure than Flora de Barral), her attraction is not only unknown to her but actually incomprehensible to the disgusted sulkiness of her mind. She is a very singular creation. Watching her is like watching the emergence of personality from the wilderness of feminine caprice. In regard to Miss Etchingham Granger (a figure of wood and not, I should suspect, Conrad's invention at all), she has the charm, so to speak, of the fourth dimension in her. She attracts men because she is the super-woman, I suppose—what one may call a fortuitous circumstance.

In *Almayer's Folly* Conrad has drawn, in Taminah, the girl slave, a strange and tragic figure of voiceless grief—a figure almost as strange, indeed, as that of Nina Almayer, and more tragic in her unrequited love. She is a true child of the patient wilderness, typifying impressively the speechless suffering of savage hearts.

In *Romance* there are two delightful women—Seraphina Riego and Mrs Williams. There is nothing deep about them, for they are intended, after all, to be figures of pure romance; but they have the fine traits of courage, of compassion, and of noble simplicity—with enough of reality to make them lovable. In their inconceivable and hopeless difference (the one a young Cuban aristocrat, the other the puritanical and middle-aged wife of a Bristol sea captain), they show qualities of a similar spirited and delightful order.

But though Conrad could imagine two very dissimilar women *en rapport* with one another he could also imagine a mother and daughter fundamentally estranged. There is the case of Susan Bacadou and



her mother, Madame Levaille, in "The Idiots." The ties of the flesh in this instance are almost the only ties that join the cowering daughter to the self-sufficient and strong-minded mother—although in her final act of rebellion the natural submissiveness of the younger seems to have been fired by the independent spirit of the elder—instinct asserting itself over personality. But I daresay this is a fanciful interpretation of a tragic occurrence.

Conrad has drawn, at times, definitely offensive women. Madame de S —, in *Under Western Eyes*, is an excellent example, so is the girl in "The Informer," and the governess in *Chance* (a person as sinister as Balzac's evil women)—but Mrs Hervey, in "The Return," though very unattractive for the most part, is in a rather different category. It is in such figures that Conrad instills all the venom of his hatred of insincerity and vapid pose. For it is only those who understand real women who can unmask frauds with such a degree of bitter contempt. I do think that is why, in certain people, great tenderness towards some is so often accompanied by great dislike towards others.

I have now considered most of the important women in Conrad's books. And if I should be blamed for devoting over much space to a few figures at the expense of others, I can only reply that these are the figures that Conrad, himself, has elaborated most carefully. In such portraits as those of Mrs Gould and Winnie Verloc he has concentrated the very essence of his conclusions and of his sympathy. For, above everything else, he requires a subtle femininity in his women. As Marlow says:—

Observe that I say "femininity," a privilege—not "feminism," an attitude. (*Chance*, p. 133.)

In Conrad's eyes all the graces of intuition and pity in women spring from this subtle femininity. His finest women, it is true, are women of character and resolve, but they have the feminine temperament. Not only is there no antagonism between the two, but they are in accord with one another. It is only the muddle-headed who would deny it. And Conrad's women do not trade on their sex—their femininity is unconscious. Meredith drew splendid women but they are splendid with the glitter of typically exalted characteristics. But Conrad's women are beautiful because they are unaware of their gifts and are pictured without the aid of heaped-up glories. In short, they are more individualised portraits than Meredith's, and, consequently, they possess that magnetic charm which, so often, is just lacking in his. Such is my opinion, though I will add that a lady I know assures me that it is the converse that is accurate—that, indeed, it is Meredith's women who are individual and Conrad's who are typical. She says that Meredith understands women from a woman's point of view whereas Conrad only understands them from a man's point of view. This does seem to me a very fallacious way of looking at the matter. (It is the question of "personality" as apart from "character," that I discussed in the last chapter.) If a woman has a charming and compassionate nature it is ridiculous to say that that is a man's point of view—it is merely true. I quite admit that there are certain types more sympathetic to one sex than to the other, but in so far as these differences are accentuated the type is morbid. The fact is, that when a man talks about a woman's point of view or a woman talks about a man's point of view in relation to sex, they always have in mind the point

of view of the typical narrow-minded man or fanatical woman. I am not denying that it is *possible* that Meredith's women may be more individual than Conrad's. That, I presume, is a matter of opinion—and, in the sense that Meredith can, admittedly, probe into the nervous crises in women, I will even admit that there is, in appearance, quite a strong case for the contention—but I do hope that people will not found their arguments on this rigid conception of personality. The truth is, surely, that certain types of men understand certain types of women, and *vice versa*, better than members of their own sex do. But that is by the way. Reality is the chief consideration in character-drawing, and it is fanciful to suppose that what is individual in the eyes of one sex may be only typical in the eyes of the other. Such are the errors that build up the barriers of a mutual estrangement.

But to return to something less polemical, I should remind the reader that when I speak in these high terms of Conrad's women, I am, of course, referring only to his finest creations. For some of the others are mere sketches, and some of them are not even convincing—Doña Erminia, for instance, in "Gaspar Ruiz." No, I speak of the few who stand in the forefront of his work. In such there is, indeed, a kind of deep, intense glow of life, reminding one, somehow, of Turner's sunsets or of that ruddy health which seems to lie under the skin of certain people. It is one of these things one feels very strongly but which eludes all description. It is the secret of creative realism.

## CHAPTER VIII

### CONRAD'S IRONY AND SARDONIC HUMOUR

IT requires no particular astuteness to discover that the irony of contrast is often present in the works of Conrad. It is only the wideness and subtlety of its ramifications that may escape attention. Indeed, there is something elusive and elf-like about it. His irony ranges over a spacious field, from simple sarcasm to broad humour, from a mere breath to a pervasive atmosphere, from the kindliness of Anatole France to the savagery of William Beckford. But the root of it all is the melancholy of disillusionment rather than an actually sceptical view of existence. It is, perhaps, this northern and Slavonic melancholy which gives to his irony its singular quality. We know the brusque irony of Voltaire, the suave irony of Jane Austen—typical enough representatives of the Latin and the Anglo-Saxon mind—but an irony like Conrad's is bewildering not alone in its ceaseless variety but in its very foundations. For the ironic melancholy of Turgenev or Galsworthy is something quite apart from the ironic melancholy of Conrad. They are depressed because life, which is beautiful, is also futile, and their irony is a sort of shield for their own sensibility—but Conrad is untouched by artistic egoism of this description. His irony is the cause of his melancholy—he does not fall back upon irony as a shelter from pessimistic conclusions.

But we must remember that with Conrad irony

is not solely a philosophic conception, but is also an artistic method of presenting a picture or even of creating an atmosphere. There is a certain unity, a certain perspective to be gained from viewing men from an ironical standpoint. And, indeed, Conrad is very fond of this method. In such tales as "Heart of Darkness," *Lord Jim*, and *Chance*, Marlow, who may be called Conrad's familiar devil—(there is a general idea that Marlow is Conrad himself, but, of course, Conrad is the shadowy person in the background who listens to Marlow)—serves to give us Conrad's own melancholy and ironical philosophy, but when we consider a book like *The Secret Agent* we are faced with a much more delicate use of the ironic method. For the whole fabric of *The Secret Agent* is ironic—no one can appreciate it who misses that—and ironic in a very impersonal way. In other words, the irony of *The Secret Agent* is more an artistic than a philosophic attitude. *The Secret Agent*, in its very idea, is studied irony, not cruel, not probing, but quite emotionless. It is satire minus the sting and the laugh. Meredith with his theory of the Comic Spirit might well have appreciated this book—though the Comic Spirit is, in essence, an inhuman invention. For, as far as I can judge, the Comic Spirit feeds its vitality upon imagining a state of things which positively does not exist. As often as not it is a mere paradox. Moreover, by its creator's own definition it can breathe only in the rarified air of a universal culture. But true irony is not necessarily other than a form of aloofness. The Comic Spirit is a brilliant fancy, yielding occasional revelations but leaving dark an immense side of life; whereas the ironic spirit, in all its branches, is but the wisdom of knowledge and often of bitter experience. In reading such a



book as *The Secret Agent*, or, in a lesser degree, such a book as *Under Western Eyes*, we feel that Conrad is a mere watcher leaving his characters to fight out alone with fate the battle of good and evil, of purpose and futility. Not that Conrad exactly obtrudes himself in his earlier work but that he is always close at hand. One is conscious of the difference. This atmosphere surrounding *The Secret Agent* is unostentatious and may easily be missed. And the reason of that is that it is the idea of the book, as I say, that is ironic—much of the material is, in itself, essentially tragic.

And so Conrad's irony may be impersonal as in *The Secret Agent*, may be melancholy as in *Lord Jim*, or may, indeed, be a thing outside himself altogether as in "The Informer." In *The Secret Agent* he is observing the world, in *Lord Jim* he is judging the world, in "The Informer" he is creating irony as an asset of character. Mr X in that story is not primarily a subject for irony, he is ironic himself—or, rather, he is ruthlessly sardonic. Nowhere does Conrad show his mastery of the sardonic more eloquently than in Mr X. For to be ironic at the expense of others is sometimes easy enough, but to form a person whose irony is sufficient, one might think, to make his very creator uncomfortable is a real feat of imagination. This is not the sort of point it is worth while dwelling on, of course, but it will serve to introduce a discussion as to the temper of Conrad's irony. Mr X, as I have observed, is ruthlessly sardonic—lashed, as it were, by a cold fury against conventional respectability ; and Conrad, himself, though far too balanced a mind to be an echo of Mr X's extravagances, can yet, on occasions, be as scathing as Swift himself. There are cruel moments in Conrad's

intellect, extraordinarily incompassionate and cruel moments. They pass and are gone, but they are ever ready to leap out upon the unwary. They resemble sudden and piercing stabs unbaring at one thrust the hideous nakedness of the heart. They are simply terrific. The sardonic spirit is more prevalent in Conrad's recent books than in his early ones. In his earlier books he can be violently sarcastic, as in his description in "The Return" of Alvan Hervey's reason for supporting a society publication or, as in his description in "Heart of Darkness," of the glorious and civilising activities of the Great Company; but in his later work, such work as "An Anarchist" or "Freya of the Seven Islands" or *Some Reminiscences*, the shafts aimed at rottenness have the biting, mordant, and sombre irony that eats into the very flesh. But that all this implies a change in Conrad's attitude to life, other than a development in his whole conception of the writer's art, is questionable. No doubt one change might reasonably imply the other, but, with Conrad, I am inclined to think that the balance of influence is artistic rather than philosophic. For it is with his later reserve of manner that the humour of his mind has grown more sardonic and the pessimism of his philosophy less prone to obvious revelation. We can notice this particularly in his last four books.

However, I must take care what I say about the differences in his work or I shall find myself nailed down to a definition which can be made to refute me out of its own mouth. I don't deny for an instant that one could unearth examples, both in Conrad's earlier and in his later work, that would render a precisely different reading to my theories (for example, the irony of "A Smile of Fortune" is almost tender

in regard to Jacobus and his daughter though it is sardonic in regard to the "smile" itself), but, after all, I am only trying to point out the tendency to change in Conrad's attitude. I only state that where he once was sarcastic he is now sardonic, and that the most probable reason for this is, in the main, an increased precision of style—and, roughly, I believe that to be the truth. There is every sign that Conrad has altered his style, not only in its form but in its method of presenting his opinions, but there is next to no proof that his philosophy to-day is different from what it was fifteen years ago.

But all this is only one aspect of Conrad's irony. Incongruous association, for example, throws a touch of pensive and premeditated irony over all the four stories in *Typhoon*. This special aspect of the irony of contrast has a philosophic basis which acts as a telling, even if a risky, dramatic expedient. It is the unimaginative MacWhirr ("Typhoon") who has to face the might of the storm, it is the dense Amy Foster ("Amy Foster") who is captivated by the brilliant Yanko Goorall, it is the respectable Falk ("Falk") who is guilty of cannibalism, it is the doting Hagberd ("To-morrow"), a father who lives for his son alone, who fails to recognise him when he appears. Such irony takes on the colour of its surroundings—being, let us say, epic in "Typhoon" and pathetic in "To-morrow." It is true that in a practised and skilful hand like Conrad's it avoids the unreality that lurks in wait for every variety of coincidence, but, all the same, it is a medium that has to be manipulated with the nicest artistic balance. A more strictly legitimate use of this type of irony is in the contrast of character to character, arising from the concealed antagonisms of personality. For

in the latter case one avoids the danger (a true danger though a splendid one) of symbolism. When stupid Captain MacWhirr conquers the fury of the typhoon one feels instinctively that there is something symbolic here of the indomitable soul of man, but when, in *Nostromo*, Charles Gould's love fades imperceptibly into his passion for his mine, such symbolism as there is is swamped in contemplation of the tragic and all too common likelihood of the occurrence. Both situations are ironic and both situations are realistic, but the contrast in the first is overwhelming and, as it were, material, whilst in the second it is gradual and inevitable. Even in "To-morrow" it is the whole setting that is symbolic rather than the individual relationships. However I have no wish to spin my threads too fine.

Conrad's sense of irony derives, at times, its accumulative effect from the junction of numerous streams, flowing from his main impulses. In the pages of *Nostromo*, Decoud and Dr Monygham sum up in their caustic phrases the futility and meaninglessness of South American civilisation, but before ever they spoke an impersonal and subtly ironic voice had breathed the same message through every line. Melancholy and mockery often go hand in hand in an ironical mind. Here, in *Nostromo* (though *Nostromo* is not fundamentally ironic at all as is *The Secret Agent*) Conrad's irony touches all the sides of life. It touches, as we have noticed, the Goulds, sundered for ever by the power of "material interests," it touches Nostromo, killed tragically with his two secrets on his lips, and it touches, in a grosser sense, a man like Señor Hirsch, throwing himself into the very arms of the one thing he fears most of all—death. Conrad has a striking method of picturing the irony of "now and then"

in the case of such people as Señor Hirsch. He does it by the politest reminder of their former state, repeated several times. So polite is it that it might be taken as a mere observation rather than as an ironical aside. I will give one instance, *apropos* of the abject Hirsch, which may be taken as typical of a very usual method of Conrad's :—

A slight quiver passed up the taut rope from the racked limbs, but the body of Señor Hirsch, enterprising business man from Esmeralda, hung under the heavy beam perpendicular and silent, facing the colonel awfully. (*Nostramo*, p. 381. This makes part of a longer passage I have quoted in another chapter.)

It is as unassuming as it is trenchant. And sometimes he will achieve the result by a single word as when, in *The Secret Agent*, he is describing that quite worthless person, Comrade Ossipon :—

Alexander Ossipon, anarchist, nicknamed the Doctor, author of a medical (and improper) pamphlet, late lecturer on the social aspects of hygiene to working men's clubs, was free from the trammels of conventional morality. (*The Secret Agent*, p. 422.)

and then the result is still more illuminating if possible.

Conrad, I repeat, is addicted to this sort of ironical contrast, and occasionally he will present it in an even milder form of ironical comment. In *Lord Jim*, for instance, one of the assessors at Jim's examination sits there in his position of authority and tried integrity as though thoroughly bored with the weakness of humanity—but Conrad suddenly pauses to explain how Captain Brierly committed suicide a few weeks later. In *Under Western Eyes* there is Councillor Mikulin of the secret police who cross-examines



Razumov with a terrifying reserve of power and influence—but again, Conrad pauses to recount how Mikulin, himself, fell some years afterwards into the depths of suspicion and degradation. Here you have two commanding men, safe, feared, respected, facing two unhappy wretches, and it is just as if Conrad were all at once to whisper in your ear “ Yes, but wait a moment—I’ll show you something,” and were to give you a glimpse into the mysterious workings of fate and of men’s hearts. This, indeed, is the melancholy side of Conrad’s irony—the realisation not only that life is obscure and fruitless but that people are, in truth, completely ignorant about it. As he says in “ The Return ” (talking of Alvan Hervey and his wife) :—

They skimmed over the surface of life hand in hand, in a pure and frosty atmosphere—like two skilful skaters cutting figures on thick ice for the admiration of the beholders, and disdainfully ignoring the hidden stream, the stream restless and dark ; the stream of life, profound and unfrozen. (*Tales of Unrest*, “ The Return,” pp. 178-9.)

It is a remark ironical in its very intensity.

Something of this blindness may be noted as the ironical background to *Under Western Eyes*. Conrad’s view of the Genevan circle of Russian conspirators reminds one of Turgenev’s view of the Baden-Baden circle in *Smoke*. The sardonic spirit in both writers hates the pretence so often sunning itself in the shelter of elevated causes, and is cynically amused at the gullibility of enthusiasts. Nevertheless both Turgenev and Conrad show the sincerest admiration for nobility and singleness of heart. I need not quote from Turgenev, whose work is so widely known, and as to Conrad I will merely mention that there is no grander figure in *Under Western Eyes* than Haldin

and no meaner figure than Peter Ivanovitch. Yet both, ostensibly, are in the vanguard of the same cause. But the first is genuine, whereas the second draws his sustenance from the credulous admiration of sincere fanatics. This unfounded and unseeing faith is a weakness from which no states of society have ever been immune. The last page of *Under Western Eyes*, in the light of knowledge, is a most ironical footnote upon the whole subject.

Conrad's melancholy irony often reveals itself in dramatic climax—it might be called, then, the irony of pity. It is at the moment of his success that Jim (*Lord Jim*) meets his death, it is at the moment of relief that Kayerts and Carlier ("An Outpost of Progress") break down completely, it is at the moment of safety that Charley ("The Brute") loses his beloved, it is at the moment when their long wait is all but triumphantly surmounted that Jasper and Freya ("Freya of the Seven Islands") are cheated of the very happiness over which their hands are closing. I need not continue such instances because, naturally, they must always abound in writers as dramatic as Conrad; but I may point out that they do show conclusively how urgent in his mind is the ever-present idea of tragic fate. The worst of it is that, in the irony of climax as in the irony of symbolic contrast, there is a suggestion of coincidence which is apt to leave one uncomfortable in proportion as it is perfect. To deal in such thrilling crises is to play with fire—and to get singed now and again.

There is another danger about irony and that is that, in the words of a writer in *The New Age*, "it ends by deceiving its author." I mention this here not because I think Conrad has fallen, to any extent, into this mistake (his irony is usually far too clear-

sighted and humane for that) but because it is so common in the English satirists of to-day. The constant, unrelieved, and often pointless irony of such men as Samuel Butler and Hilaire Belloc becomes a weariness. The tables are turned with a vengeance and we end by disliking the authors more than their butts. Irony must have proportion or it loses its sting. And what could be more truly ironic than the blindness of irony itself?

And here I may add that, for the critic too, the whole subject of irony is a dangerous one. In every act of life there is a certain ironic significance, and unless the critic is very careful there is a real chance of his losing all sense of proportion in judging the bounds and purposes of intentional irony. One must not overdo it and yet, with a novelist like Conrad in whom irony has such distinct, individual, and subtle manifestations, one must lay particular stress upon it. For the English mind has, I think, little of the *finesse* of irony in its constitution and little of the bitterness or even the melancholy of irony, though, assuredly, it is rich in ironical resignation and revolt. And that, precisely, is not Conrad's type of irony. You will find it in thoroughly English writers like Dickens and Chesterton (it goes frequently with bursts of irritation), but you will not find it in a Slav writer such as Conrad. To Conrad humour is not a guise for resignation (or its converse, rebellion), although his humour is so often tinged with irony. But then it has no philosophic basis and is ironic without ulterior motive. In a nutshell, Conrad's humour is the humour of his special ironic realism. When Leonard, the half-caste, tells Willems (*An Outcast of the Islands*) that he must not be brutal to him because it is "unbecoming between white men" there is something

not only ridiculously funny in the scene but obviously ironical. I will give it in full :—

“Do not be brutal, Mr Willems,” said Leonard, hurriedly. “It is unbecoming between white men with all those natives looking on.” Leonard’s legs trembled very much, and his voice wavered between high and low tones without any attempt at control on his part. “Restrain your improper violence,” he went on mumbling rapidly. “I am a respectable man of very good family, while you . . . it is regrettable . . . they all say so. . . .” (*An Outcast of the Islands*, p. 31.)

And, again, in “Typhoon,” when the second mate, who had lost his nerve in the storm, gets the sack at Fu-Chau and meets his seedy friend on shore, the picture of the two men is not only amusing in the highest degree but full of a contemptuous and ironical undercurrent. Let me quote :—

Before she had been quite an hour at rest, a meagre little man, with a red-tipped nose and a face cast in an angry mould, landed from a sampan on the quay of the Foreign Concession, and incontinently turned to shake his fist at her.

A tall individual, with legs much too thin for a rotund stomach, and with watery eyes, strolled up and remarked, “Just left her—eh? Quick work.”

He wore a soiled suit of blue flannel with a pair of dirty cricketing shoes; a dingy grey moustache dropped from his lip, and daylight could be seen in two places between the rim and the crown of his hat.

“Hallo! what are you doing here?” asked the ex-second-mate of the *Nan-Shan*, shaking hands hurriedly.

“Standing by for a job—chance worth taking—got a quiet hint,” explained the man with the broken hat, in jerky, apathetic wheezes.

The second shook his fist again at the *Nan-Shan*.

“There’s a fellow there that ain’t fit to have the command of a scow,” he declared, quivering with passion, while the other looked about listlessly.

"Is there?"

But he caught sight on the quay of a heavy seaman's chest, painted brown under a fringed sailcloth cover, and lashed with new manila line. He eyed it with awakened interest.

"I would talk and raise trouble if it wasn't for that damned Siamese flag. Nobody to go to—or I would make it hot for him. The fraud! Told his chief engineer—that's another fraud for you—I had lost my nerve. The greatest lot of ignorant fools that ever sailed the seas. No! You can't think. . . ."

"Got your money all right?" inquired his seedy acquaintance suddenly.

"Yes. Paid me off on board," raged the second mate. "Get your breakfast on shore," says he."

"Mean skunk!" commented the tall man vaguely, and passed his tongue on his lips. "What about having a drink of some sort?"

"He struck me," hissed the second mate.

"No! Struck! You don't say?" The man in blue began to bustle about sympathetically. "Can't possibly talk here. I want to know all about it. Struck—eh? Let's get a fellow to carry your chest. I know a quiet place where they have some bottled beer. . . ."

Mr Jukes, who had been scanning the shore through a pair of glasses, informed the chief engineer afterwards that "our late second mate hasn't been long in finding a friend. A chap looking uncommonly like a bummer. I saw them walk away together from the quay." (*Typhoon*, "Typhoon" p. 100-2.)

[How many people, I wonder, have noticed what a marvellous piece of art this conversation is. It is one of the most finished things of its kind in Conrad's works, and, as a *finale* to the horrors of the typhoon, tremendously effective. The "soft spot" is as visible here as amongst the officers on board the *Patna* (*Lord Jim*)].

Conrad's whole sense of humour is, in fact, extra-



ordinarily interesting. It is unique in a sense no less absolute than is the humour of Dostoievsky. It has that pathetic and realistic bizarreness which one connects with the Slavonic spirit. Think of all those quaint and startled stewards that flit through his tales, through such tales, for instance, as "Typhoon," "The Secret Sharer," "A Smile of Fortune," *Chance*, and so forth; or think of a figure like Captain Mitchell (*Nostromo*), sententiously (and quite falsely) imagining himself the centre of affairs, or of poor, deluded Feraud in "The Duel." Or just take a passage like the following:—

The old major of the battalion, a stupid, suspicious man, who had never been afloat in his life, distinguished himself by putting out suddenly the binnacle light, the only one allowed on board for the necessities of navigation. He could not understand of what use it could be for finding the way. To the vehement protestations of the ship's captain, he stamped his foot and tapped the handle of his sword. "Aha! I have unmasked you," he cried triumphantly. "You are tearing your hair from despair at my acuteness. Am I a child to believe that a light in that brass box can show you where the harbour is? I am an old soldier, I am. I can smell a traitor a league off. You wanted that gleam to betray our approach to your friend the Englishman. A thing like that show you the way! What a miserable lie! Que picardia! You Sulaco people are all in the pay of those foreigners." (*Nostromo*, p. 243.)

But I will not give further examples for, after all, humour of this kind is only on the fringe of irony. Conrad's humour, at its easiest, has the keenness of a blade without its deadly suggestion. It is, in truth, simply a sense of humour dyed, instinctively, with the colour of Conrad's unusual and always slightly ironical personality.

There is a trace of Dickens in Conrad's humour,

but a mere trace and nothing more. For it is mingled with a much rarer, a much subtler genius. Perhaps actually the most Dickens-like character in his books is Flora de Barral's manufacturer cousin. The passage I give here is my justification for this statement :—

He gazed contemptuously round the prettily decorated dining-room. He wrinkled his nose in a puzzled way at the dishes offered to him by the waiter but refused none, devouring the food with a great appetite and drinking ("swilling" Fyne called it) gallons of ginger beer, which was procured for him (in stone bottles) at his request. The difficulty of keeping up a conversation with that being exhausted Mrs Fyne herself, who had come to the table armed with adamant resolution. The only memorable thing he said was when, in a pause of gorging himself "with these French dishes" he deliberately let his eyes roam over the little tables occupied by parties of diners, and remarked that his wife did for a moment think of coming down with him, but that he was glad she didn't do so. "She wouldn't have been at all happy seeing all this alcohol about. Not at all happy," he declared weightily. (*Chance*, p. 120.)

It is probable, as I said in my introductory chapter, that this omnipresent irony is one of the reasons for Conrad's comparative lack of popularity. Sophia Antonovna in *Under Western Eyes* sums it up perfectly when she says :—

"Remember, Razumov, that women, children, and revolutionists hate irony, which is the negation of all saving instincts, of all faith, of all devotion, of all action." (*Under Western Eyes*, p. 275.)

I seem to discern a double irony in that remark—as though Conrad had been thinking to himself. "That's what people will be saying of me." But no doubt it is a purely fantastic notion on my part.

Because irony is the foe of fanaticism and of the

unruffled certitude of the *idée fixe* is, one may suppose, partly why Conrad conceived *Under Western Eyes* and *The Secret Agent* (the two novels about extremists) as ironical entities—though, as I stated before, it appears to be more an artistic than a philosophic device—for only in such a spirit could the gravity of fanaticism be proportioned to its actual worth.

But the great thing to grasp about Conrad's irony is this startling fact that, deep down in his heart, his irony is more tragic than comic—that is to say, more Slavonic than French. It is that which must differentiate his mind for ever from the mind of such men as Anatole France or Remy de Gourmont. I do believe that the reason for this is fundamentally one of realism. Conrad's grip on life is realistic to the uttermost, and consequently his irony cannot drown his faith in actuality. To say that he is more of a creator than a philosopher is only to say that he is concerned more with existence than with theories concerning it. Moreover the melancholy of his irony merges into a melancholy that is not ironic at all except in a kind of a cosmic sense which can hardly enter into our calculations. This is the sort of irony that pervades a book like *An Outcast of the Islands*, the irony of disillusionment and of vanished hope. I sometimes think that the last page or two of that strange book are the very epitome of his ironic melancholy—an irony more tragic than ironic. The quotation is rather long but I will give it here because it represents my meaning so perfectly :—

He dozed off. Almayer stood by the balustrade looking out at the bluish sheen of the moonlit night. The forests, unchanged and sombre, seemed to hang over the water, listening to the unceasing whisper of the great river ; and above their dark wall the hill on which Lingard had buried

the body of his late prisoner rose in a black, rounded mass, upon the silver paleness of the sky. Almayer looked for a long time at the clean-cut outline of the summit, as if trying to make out through darkness and distance the shape of that expensive tombstone. When he turned round at last he saw his guest sleeping, his arms on the table, his head on his arms.

"Now, look here!" he shouted, slapping the table with the palm of his hand.

The naturalist woke up, and sat all in a heap, staring owlshly.

"Here!" went on Almayer, speaking very loud and thumping the table, "I want to know. You, who say you have read all the books, just tell me . . . why such damned things are ever born. Here I am! Done harm to nobody, lived an honest life . . . and a scoundrel like that is born in Rotterdam or some such damn'd place at the other end of the world somewhere, travels out here, robs his employer, runs away from his wife, and ruins me and my Nina—he ruined me, I tell you—and gets himself shot at last by a poor miserable savage, that knows nothing at all about him really. Where's the sense of all this? Where's your Providence? Where's the good for anybody in all this? The world's a swindle! A swindle! Why should I suffer? What have I done to be treated so?"

He howled out his string of questions, and suddenly became silent. The man who ought to have been a professor made a tremendous effort to articulate distinctly—

"My dear fellow, don't—don't you see that the ba-bare fac—the fact of your existence is off—offensive. . . . I—I like you—like. . . ."

He fell forward on the table, and ended his remarks by an unexpected and prolonged snore.

Almayer shrugged his shoulders and walked back to the balustrade. He drank his own trade gin very seldom, but, when he did, a ridiculously small quantity of the stuff could induce him to assume a rebellious attitude towards the scheme of the universe. And now, throwing his body over the rail, he shouted impudently into the night, turning his face towards that far-off and invisible slab of imported granite

upon which Lingard had thought fit to record God's mercy and Willem's escape.

"Father was wrong—wrong!" he yelled. "I want you to smart for it. You must smart for it! Where are you, Willems? Hey? . . . Hey? . . . Where there is no mercy for you—I hope!"

"Hope," repeated in a whispering echo the startled forests, the river and the hills; but Almayer, who stood waiting with his head on one side and a smile of tipsy attention on his lips, heard no other answer. (*An Outcast of the Islands*, p. 390-1.)

But to hark back, Conrad's irony is French in its clear-headed perception of motive. He is not to be deluded by grandiloquent phrases. And there is something tragically comic in the way he makes his exploited people (exploited in the name of progress) realise the utter vileness of the exploiters quite naturally, as though it were a matter of course. In "An Outpost of Progress" it is Makola, the devil-worshipping native, who understands the two white agents actually better than they understand themselves. Behind their backs he succeeds in exchanging their useless station men for some admirable tusks. The knowledge comes to their ears as follows:—

He moved towards the store. Kayerts followed him mechanically, thinking about the incredible desertion of the men. On the ground before the door of the fetish lay six splendid tusks.

"What did you give for it?" asked Kayerts, after surveying the lot with satisfaction.

"No regular trade," said Makola. "They brought the ivory and gave it to me. I told them to take what they most wanted in the station. It is a beautiful lot. No station can show such tusks. Those traders wanted carriers badly, and our men were no good here. No trade, no entry in books; all correct."

Kayerts nearly burst with indignation. "Why!" he



shouted, "I believe you have sold our men for these tusks!" Makola stood impassive and silent. "I—I—will—I—" stuttered Kayerts. "You fiend!" he yelled out.

"I did the best for you and the Company," said Makola imperturbably. "Why you shout so much? Look at this tusk."

"I dismiss you! I will report you—I won't look at the tusk. I forbid you to touch them. I order you to throw them into the river. You—you!"

"You very red, Mr Kayerts. If you are so irritable in the sun, you will get fever and die—like the first chief!" pronounced Makola impressively. (*Tales of Unrest*, "An Outpost of Progress," pp. 150-1.)

But the result may be foreseen—a beautiful resignation to evil (and profitable) fortune. There is something exquisitely and unconsciously sardonic in Makola's treatment of the white men's feelings. He has gauged these two men, has reckoned the value of their sentimentalism against the value of their greed, not through any profound powers of psychology but simply through his ordinary knowledge of the white men who have come to his country. That was what the blessings of civilisation meant to his intelligence! Could any fact be more withering?

And remember what Conrad says of the old Malay Sarang in "The End of the Tether":—

He was certain of his facts—but such a certitude counted for little against the doubt what answer would be pleasing. (*Youth*, "The End of the Tether," p. 252.)

But, perhaps, the most sardonic remark in the whole of Conrad's works is put into the mouth of the black servant in "Heart of Darkness," who has to announce the death of Mr Kurtz, that great apostle of progress and enlightenment:—

Suddenly the manager's boy put his insolent black head in the doorway, and said in a tone of scathing contempt—

"Mistah Kurtz—he dead." (*Youth*, "Heart of Darkness," p. 169.)

There is nothing more to be said after that. It is the last word of disillusionment, as surely the last word as is the end of *An Outcast of the Islands*.

## CHAPTER IX

### CONRAD'S PROSE

THE thought of Conrad's style suggests at once a very curious speculation—how does a Pole come to write English of this nature? Of course, there is no real answer; but the fact of it is, after all, the most astonishing thing about Conrad's prose. And yet, in a sense, the very correctness of his prose (for, with the exception of an occasional tiny grammatical error it *is* correct) militates against the recognition people yield to any extraordinary *tour de force*. Yoshio Markino's quaint English enraptures the critics, but you do not hear loud pæans of praise because Conrad's English is not quaint. The reason is simply this, that Markino is considered a foreigner whereas Conrad is considered an Englishman. It is a compliment paid to perfection.

All the same, and quite outside the subject of technical proficiency, there is a foreign element in the spirit and substance of Conrad's prose which does require analysis. That strange, exotic manner of regarding our language which is so evident in his earlier books is an instance. His treatment of our tongue is one of the most exciting adventures in the long annals of English literature. And it is exciting because of its profound originality. His music is not the mere enlargement of older English strains, it is a new music altogether—the romantic, mysterious, and thrilling music of another race. There is a

Latin, harp-like rhythm about Conrad's prose which is intensely individual. Few people, I think, have realised the fundamental difference between Conrad's prose and all the prose of the English schools. For it is Conrad's mastery of the details of our language that hides from us the deep originality of his method.

But, as I say, all this is much easier to note in his earlier than in his later work. A revolutionary change has come over Conrad's prose—a change just visible in the "Amy Foster" of *Typhoon*, and in full force from *Under Western Eyes* onward—which, like all revolutions, alters the face while keeping the heart mainly untouched. This revolution (or, if you like, evolution) has smoothed away the cadence, has concentrated the manner, has toned down the style of Conrad's former exuberance. At first glance the later and the earlier Conrad appear two totally different men. The murky splendour of the one has given way to the subtle and elastic suavity of the other. Perhaps I can explain the difference better by a simile. It is as though Conrad's earlier work were a free swinging wire, with a glorious sweep and a deep booming note, and his later work, were the same wire, tightened up, and vibrating and humming with a tense, swift, and almost invisible action. There is no doubt that Conrad's earlier prose is more immediately stimulating—and, indeed, there are individual passages in it which actually are his finest things—but his later prose is undoubtedly a subtler achievement. It is fuller of nervous, concentrated energy. It is like breathing the rare atmosphere of the heights after walking the wooded valleys below. His earlier prose is sometimes uncertain, sometimes exaggerated, but his later prose has the uniform temper of absolute mastery. And it would be interest-

ing to know whether this change is not partly due to a more accurate conception of English. Of course, there are other influences obviously at work ; but whether this also may not count for something is the question. From its very nature it must be left unanswered, but internal evidence is in its favour. But we must remember, too, that his early work was tinged in a familiar sense by a recent association with the tropics and the sea, and that as the years gradually divide the present from the past such influence must necessarily be less strong. And then, again, is it not possible that Conrad is deliberately setting himself to become, as it were, more purely literary, more impersonal ? For in Conrad the artist is more and more predominant. But, indeed, the change is perhaps a natural development that could have been foretold from the beginning—a development inherent in the nature of the work. I wonder. The only certain thing is that there is a change,

The more obvious idiosyncracies of Conrad's style appear, as one would expect, in his early work. Books like *Tales of Unrest* and *Youth* bristle with what is generally considered the typical Conradesque prose. The triolets of sound by which his most gorgeous effects are secured, the repetition of formidable words which instil the very breath of tropical forests in our lungs, the langorous roll of his sentences suggesting the motion of sluggish and steamy rivers, abound everywhere.

Yes, it is very rich, this early style of Conrad's. It would be interesting to know to what extent his long association with the sea has helped to create not only its spirit in his books, but its very beats within the swell of his periods. For, at its typical, that is what it is like—a monotonous and golden rhythm,



a sonorous ebb and flow. He is a magician in the use of those dangerous things—adjectives. Just occasionally, as I say, this does result in a feeling of exaggeration, as in “Heart of Darkness” and “The Return,” but generally it is extremely eloquent and has the effect of a symphony.

Moreover his language is musical in another sense. As in a composition the same theme will occur every now and again, so it is at times with his stories, in which he will repeat at intervals the same sentence like a slow refrain. The repetition of such a clause as this out of “The Return” produces almost the illusion of sound :—

The secret of hearts, too terrible for the timid eyes of men, shall return, veiled for ever, to the Inscrutable Creator of good and evil, to the Master of doubts and impulses. (*Tales of Unrest*, “The Return,” pp. 268 and (slightly different) 254.)

This is just one instance.

At its best this early style of Conrad's is unmatched for the sheer magnificence of its achievement. The false note dies away before the efforts of a glowing and romantic imagination. It is in descriptions of tropical nights and primeval forests, of nature vast and untamed, that the prose of Conrad rises to supreme heights. For it is endowed not alone with the poetry of beautiful language but with a sort of melancholy and ironic philosophy which is strangely moving. I cannot do better than give a few examples. Look at this :—

The far-off blackness ahead of the ship was like another night seen through the starry night of the earth—the starless night of the immensities beyond the created universe, revealed in its appalling stillness through a low fissure

in the glittering sphere of which the earth is the kernel. (*Typhoon*, "Typhoon," p. 32.)

Or at this :—

A multitude of stars coming out into the clear night peopled the emptiness of the sky. They glittered, as if alive above the sea ; they surrounded the running ship on all sides ; more intense than the eyes of a staring crowd, and as inscrutable as the souls of men. (*The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* p. 41.)

Or at this :—

She dropped her head, and as if her ears had been opened to the voices of the world, she heard beyond the rampart of sea wall the swell of yesterday's gale breaking on the beach with monotonous and solemn vibrations, as if all the earth had been a tolling bell. (*Typhoon*, "To-morrow," p. 294.)

Or at this :—

A murmur powerful and gentle, a murmur vast and faint ; the murmur of trembling leaves, of stirring boughs, ran through the tangled depths of the forests, ran over the starry smoothness of the lagoon, and the water between the piles lapped the slimy timber once with a sudden splash. A breath of warm air touched the two men's faces and passed on with a mournful sound—a breath loud and short like an uneasy sigh of the dreaming earth. (*Tales of Unrest*, "The Lagoon," p. 290.)

Or at this :—

She was headed between two small islets, crossed obliquely the anchoring-ground of sailing-ships, swung through half a circle in the shadow of a hill, then ranged close to a ledge of foaming reefs. The Arab, standing up aft, recited aloud the prayer of travellers by sea. He invoked the favour of the Most High upon that journey, implored His blessing on men's toil and on the secret purposes of their hearts ; the steamer pounded in the dusk the calm water of the Strait ; and far astern of the pilgrim ship a screw-pile lighthouse,

planted by unbelievers on a treacherous shoal, seemed to wink at her its eye of flame, as if in derision of her errand of faith. (*Lord Jim*, pp. 14-15.)

Of course, prose like this is open to many objections and could only be used safely by a very great master. But where it is successful it is tremendous. That is my point. To write such descriptions is like creating a new use for language, like giving it the attributes of several senses. Perhaps it is not strictly proper, but that does not matter as long as the result is what it is. Where one does feel the strain of such a style is in its ordinary application to the purposes of a whole book and also in its tendency towards exaggeration and portentousness not only in itself but in the scenes and emotions it depicts. Conrad's later style is, in the main, a far more supple instrument. For it conceals a spirit of irony to whom the tragic sweep of his early sentences would appear forbidding. And it is wonderful to note how, in his descriptions of scenery, the darkness has slowly faded into light. The heavy gloom of the descriptions in "*Heart of Darkness*" has yielded to the tender fancy of the descriptions in "*Freya of the Seven Islands*." With the changing of the point of view the prose has become more delicate, more sustained, and more finely tuned.

But I admit that in making a comparison one tends to overdo it at either end. It is not at all my opinion that Conrad's earlier prose is all of one *genre* or that it is not constantly altering in some way or other. At its choicest, which is in the recreation of lost illusions or vanished pictures, it has the flexibility of his latest work joined to the soft richness of his first period. But it is always somewhat monotonous by reason of the atmosphere which surrounds it. Conrad's prose has never been more imaginatively beautiful than in such stories

as "Youth," and *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* but the shy notes of its beauty are drowned in the glamour and fragrance of the scene. That is why so many people fail to realise the sensitiveness of Conrad's early work while they do realise all the magic of its colour. But it is true that the general impression is one of overpowering imagery and wealth of language. His later work is quite different in its broad effect. And we begin to feel this difference in books that, properly speaking, form a middle period—*Nostromo* and *The Secret Agent*. The prose, in particular, in which *Nostromo* is written is almost perfect. Beautiful and full of *nuance*, it is not the ironic prose of *Under Western Eyes* any more than it is the purely romantic prose of *Tales of Unrest*. In fact, its prose is the least self-conscious in Conrad. It is designed to create, with potent veritability, the canvas of a huge panorama; and it hardly falters in its stride. It is in *Nostromo* that the originality of Conrad's style appears most unique and most unapproachable. For it has neither the mannerism of the earlier books nor the attitude of the later ones. No, it is like a river flowing calmly, flowing assuredly into all the complicated interstices of the land. Let me give two quotations to represent my meaning:—

At night the body of the clouds advancing higher up the sky smothers the whole quiet gulf below with an impenetrable darkness, in which the sound of the falling showers can be heard beginning and ceasing abruptly—now here, now there. Indeed, these cloudy nights are proverbial with the seamen along the whole west coast of a great continent. Sky, land, and sea disappear together out of the world when the Placido—as the saying is—goes to sleep under its black poncho. The few stars left below the seaward frown of the vault shine feebly as into the mouth of a black cavern. In its vastness your ship floats unseen under your feet, her sails

flutter invisible above your head. The eye of God Himself—they add with grim profanity—could not find out what work a man's hand is doing in there ; and you would be free to call the devil to your aid with impunity if even his malice were not defeated by such a blind darkness. (*Nostramo*, p. 4.)

Tints of purple, gold, and crimson were mirrored in the clear water of the harbour. A long tongue of land, straight as a wall, with the grass-grown ruins of the fort making a sort of rounded green mound, plainly visible from the inner shore, closed its circuit ; and beyond the Placid Gulf repeated those splendours of colouring on a greater scale with a more sombre magnificence. The great mass of cloud filling the head of the gulf had long red smears amongst its convoluted folds of grey and black, as of a floating mantle stained with blood. The three Isabels, overshadowed and clear cut in a great smoothness confounding the sea and sky, appeared suspended, purple-black, in the air. The little wavelets seemed to be tossing tiny red sparks upon the sandy beaches. The glassy bands of water along the horizon gave out a fiery red glow, as if fire and water had been mingled together in the vast bed of the ocean.

At last the conflagration of sea and sky, lying embraced and asleep in a flaming contact upon the edge of the world, went out. The red sparks in the water vanished together with the stains of blood in the black mantle draping the sombre head of the Placid Gulf ; and a sudden breeze sprang up and died out after rustling heavily the growth of bushes on the ruined earthwork of the fort. (*Nostramo*, pp. 346-7.)

Indeed, the influences which have helped to the formation of Conrad's style are few enough altogether. His work is not in the least like that of the Russians (where one might look for affinities), and though it has points of resemblance to that of such Frenchmen as Flaubert and Maupassant, it is more in relation to the spirit than to the actual writing. There is, I think, little to be gained from comparing Conrad's prose to that of other people (his romantic use of language and, later, his ironical use of language—and



that language a foreign language—has given his prose a totally new significance), though I would except from that the earlier part of *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* which does seem to me to show definitely the influence of Flaubert. The sailors in the forecastle of the *Narcissus* are filled in with a similar touch to the barbarians in the garden of Hamilcar at the beginning of *Salammbô*. These sharp little sentences remind one exactly of Flaubert in a certain mood. (To prove that this is not mere fancy on my part I will mention here that I made this very criticism in an article I wrote on Conrad in *Rhythm*, November 1912, and that Conrad then informed me that just before writing *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* he had finished reading *Salammbô*.) And, moreover, it is from Flaubert that Conrad has gained his knowledge of managing a crowd. Indeed, considering how much sympathy there is between Conrad's mind and Flaubert's mind (both so romantic, pessimistic, and sardonic) and considering how truly Conrad admires Flaubert (see *Some Reminiscences*), and considering that almost the only obvious resemblance in Conrad's prose is to the prose of Flaubert, it is not very far fetched to say that the influence of Flaubert is the strongest in Conrad. Not that Conrad's prose, on the whole, is at all like Flaubert's, but that their aims are, I do think, very much alike in their general tendency.

Conrad's early prose is, of course, easier to quote from and easier to fix in the memory than his later prose. And that is, partly because its romantic quality is always tending towards the purple patch, partly because it is full of striking mannerisms, partly because its rhythm is more transparently musical, and partly because its appeal is altogether more to the

emotions than is the close-knit fabric of his later style. I have no doubt that in the various chapters of this book the majority of the quotations are from the earlier works. I regret it, because it does form a wrong impression, but I cannot help it. If one is to give quotations from Conrad (and I am sure that one must give quotations if one writes on Conrad), one has to choose the most suitable. And the whole method, the whole aim of the later style is against that temptation to be outstanding in patches. The sentences in such books as *Under Western Eyes* or *Chance* are too much part of the whole body to bear removal from their context. When I do quote from these late books I nearly always choose paragraphs that show, at least, the influence of the early ones. But the student of Conrad will understand that that is a form of praise—that Conrad's later prose reveals itself, in all its subtle beauty, only to the careful and the imaginative and mainly in relation to the whole book. However, as I have given quotations here from his early and middle periods, I will give one quotation from his latest. I will not give a description, for his descriptions, even though they do differ very much, all tend to be romantic, but I will give a conversation—the beginning of the first conversation between the Captain and the impure Jacobus in "A Smile of Fortune":—

By half-past seven in the morning, the ship being then inside the harbour at last and moored within a long stone's-throw from the quay, my stock of philosophy was nearly exhausted. I was dressing hurriedly in my cabin when the steward came tripping in with a morning suit over his arm.

Hungry, tired, and depressed, with my head engaged inside a white shirt irritatingly stuck together by too much starch, I desired him peevishly to "heave round with that breakfast." I wanted to get ashore as soon as possible.

"Yes, Sir. Ready at eight, Sir. There's a gentleman from the shore waiting to speak to you, Sir."

This statement was curiously slurred over. I dragged the shirt violently over my head and emerged staring.

"So early!" I cried. "Who's he? What does he want?"

On coming in from the sea one has to pick up the conditions of an utterly unrelated existence. Every little event at first has the peculiar emphasis of novelty. I was greatly surprised by that early caller; but there was no reason for my steward to look so particularly foolish.

"Didn't you ask for the name?" I inquired in a stern tone.

"His name's Jacobus, I believe," he mumbled shamefacedly.

"Mr Jacobus!" I exclaimed loudly, more surprised than ever, but with a total change of feeling. "Why couldn't you say so at once?"

But the fellow had scuttled out of my room. Through the momentarily opened door I had a glimpse of a tall, stout man standing in the cuddy by the table on which the cloth was already laid; a "harbour" table-cloth, stainless and dazzling white. So far good.

I shouted courteously through the closed door, that I was dressing and would be with him in a moment. In return the assurance that there was no hurry reached me in the visitor's deep, quiet undertone. His time was my own. He dared say I would give him a cup of coffee presently.

"I am afraid you will have a poor breakfast," I cried apologetically. "We have been sixty-one days at sea, you know."

A quiet little laugh, with a "That'll be all right Captain," was his answer. All this, words, intonation, the glimpsed attitude of the man in the cuddy, had an unexpected character, a something friendly in it—propitiatory. And my surprise was not diminished thereby. What did this call mean? Was it the sign of some dark design against my commercial innocence?

While we were taking our seats round the table some

disconnected words of an altercation going on in the companionway reached my ear. A stranger apparently wanted to come down to interview me, and the steward was opposing him.

"You can't see him."

"Why can't I?"

"The Captain is at breakfast, I tell you. He'll be going on shore presently, and you can speak to him on deck."

"That's not fair. You let——"

"I've had nothing to do with that."

"Oh, yes, you have. Everybody ought to have the same chance. You let that fellow——"

The rest I lost. The person having been repulsed successfully, the steward came down. I can't say he looked flushed—he was a mulatto—but he looked flustered. After putting the dishes on the table he remained by the sideboard with that lackadaisical air of indifference he used to assume when he had done something too clever by half and was afraid of getting into a scrape over it. The contemptuous expression of Mr Burns's face as he looked from him to me was really extraordinary. I couldn't imagine what new bee had stung the mate now.

The Captain being silent, nobody else cared to speak, as is the way in ships. And I was saying nothing simply because I had been made dumb by the splendour of the entertainment. I had expected the usual sea-breakfast, whereas I beheld spread before us a veritable feast of shore provisions: eggs, sausages, butter which plainly did not come from a Danish tin, cutlets, and even a dish of potatoes. It was three weeks since I had seen a real, live potato. I contemplated them with interest, and Mr Jacobus disclosed himself as a man of human, homely sympathies, and something of a thought-reader.

"Try them, Captain," he encouraged me in a friendly undertone. "They are excellent."

"They look that," I admitted. "Grown on the island, I suppose."

"Oh, no, imported. Those grown here would be more expensive."

I was grieved at the ineptitude of the conversation. Were

these the topics for a prominent and wealthy merchant to discuss? I thought the simplicity with which he made himself at home rather attractive; but what is one to talk about to a man who comes on one suddenly, after sixty-one days at sea, out of a totally unknown little town in an island one has never seen before? What were (besides sugar) the interests of that crumb of the earth, its gossip, its topics of conversation?

“Of course, I would have made a point of calling on you in a day or two,” I concluded.

He raised his eyelids distinctly at me, and somehow managed to look rather more sleepy than before.

“In accordance with my owners’ instructions,” I explained. “You have had their letter, of course?”

By that time he had raised his eyebrows too but without any particular emotion. On the contrary he struck me then as absolutely imperturbable.

“Oh! You must be thinking of my brother.”

It was for me, then, to say “Oh!” But I hope that no more than civil surprise appeared in my voice when I asked him to what, then, I owed the pleasure. . . . He was reaching for an inside pocket leisurely.

“My brother’s a very different person. But I am well known in this part of the world. You’ve probably heard——”

I took a card he extended to me. A thick business card, as I lived! Alfred Jacobus—the other was Ernest—dealer in every description of ship’s stores! Provisions salt and fresh, oils, paints, rope, canvas, etc., etc. Ships in harbour victualled by contract on moderate terms——

“I’ve never heard of you,” I said brusquely.

His low-pitched assurance did not abandon him.

“You will be very well satisfied,” he breathed out quietly. (*Twixt Land and Sea*, “A Smile of Fortune,” pp. 5-13.)

Of necessity this is a long quotation—one of the longest I have given—for it is difficult to suggest the special quality of Conrad’s later style in a short specimen. It may seem odd to say that the most



finished of Conrad's prose is the hardest to quote in snatches, but of course, its very finish gives it an impervious and uniform coating, welds it, so to speak, into the very substance of the story. The Conrad of the latest phase is a writer in whom all the constituents of art have only one final aspect—the aspect of perfect balance in the complete representation of the desired effect. That is why the undue emphasis of an impressive and original personality has matured into the ironic perspective of an aloof but ever powerful artist.

It is a singular thing to consider the remarkable changes which Conrad's prose has undergone. It is like a snake sloughing its skin and appearing, at each metamorphosis, with a covering of rarer texture. I see no reason to suppose that *Chance* is any more final in its style than was *Almayer's Folly* or *Nostromo*. Conrad is constantly shifting his ground—he is not like Flaubert in that. His prose is the servant of a more lively and unbiased imagination than Flaubert's. It has passed with it through all the phases of romance and sardonic philosophy, and it accompanies it always on a level equal to its swift, incalculable strides. For no one's prose more adequately represents the changes of its author's mind. It possesses, indeed, something equivalent to the changeless qualities of Conrad's art—his way of approaching a subject, his view of the purposes of prose, his fundamental reticence concealed within the eloquence of his phrases. But in other respects it has altered as Conrad has altered. The musical rhythm of the first books has died away into the finished precision of the latest. Of course, there is always *a* rhythm in Conrad's prose—but it is no longer the obvious rhythm of melody so much as the delicate rhythm of harmony. It is the same pen that

is writing, but it is a pen checked and schooled in mid-career.

On thinking of the later Conrad I am filled with a certain regret—and yet I do see that a change was, perhaps, inevitable and has decidedly given us a more brilliant writer. For the early Conrad has more command over the cadence of language than over the subtleties of style. His vocabulary tends towards the repetition of such words as “immense,” “mysterious,” “impenetrable,” and the sombre music of the wilderness is echoed almost too frequently in the three rolls of sound in which he envisages the splendour and darkness of tropical lands. It is the later Conrad whose individuality, less apparent at first sight, is really more in harmony with a great tradition. For the later Conrad is a stylist in the very way in which Flaubert is a stylist—a man to whom every word has its value, to whom every sentence has its significance. Why people do not realise that more fully is simply because his prose is neither eccentric nor mannered. The crudity, which certainly lurks in his earlier prose, has entirely gone—there is no touch of the florid here. It is absolutely compressed and finished. And when, as in the three stories of *'Twixt Land and Sea*, this is joined to the romantic spirit of his earlier work, the result is a prose of most delicious buoyancy and ease. It has the resiliency of the finest steel spring—the resiliency and the responsiveness.

I think there can be no doubt that Conrad's early style has created a theory about his style in general that prevents people realising the extent to which his prose has altered. It is a pity, for it must keep a certain class of reader away. Those who take the prose of Swift or Thackeray as their model are not likely to admire the earlier Conrad but they might

very well admire the later. So it seems to me. For the later Conrad, though he is actually a harder writer to appreciate than the earlier Conrad, is apparently nearer to the classical ideal. A certain foreign, exotic element has disappeared, and, though it has been replaced by a precision which is not English at all, still there is no longer anything "outlandish" about it. What mysteries cannot be concealed by a sardonic simplicity!

But even in Conrad's latest work, in *Chance* itself, there are the slight traces of an alien nationality. For instance—it is quite unimportant—I have counted several split infinitives in *Chance*. Nevertheless, as far as English is concerned, *Chance* is Conrad's most perfect production. I do not assert that the language has the fire of *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* or the serene beauty of *Nostromo*, but it has a surface of glistening and even polish. It presents to the critic an almost impregnable armour—though, of course, I am not saying that to be impregnable is to be everything. If perfection were to be synonymous with imagination, etching would probably be a greater art than painting. *Chance* is a very remarkable book but I do not think it is so remarkable as *Nostromo*, and I doubt whether it is so remarkable as *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*—but it is certainly more perfect than either. It is perfect in the sense of its complete unity and of the conscious mastery in every phrase. Less a work of imagination than, say, *Lord Jim*, it is more a work of art. You would not find a sentence like this in *Chance*—a sentence which occurs in *Lord Jim* :—

The lumps of white coral shone *round* the dark mound like a chaplet of bleached skulls, and everything *around* was so quiet that when I stood still all *sound* and all movement

in the world seemed to come to an end. (*Lord Jim*, p. 346—the italics are mine.)

but equally you would not find any passages like those describing the voyage of the pilgrim ship across the Indian Ocean.

In the opening chapter of this book I had to speak shortly of Conrad's theory of style in relation to that of some of his contemporaries and recent predecessors, and I made a remark there which is really so applicable to his whole prose that I will repeat it here—"his work . . . is essentially dignified and quite untinged by the pettiness of conscious self-approval." How absolutely true that is of his prose! It is that, combined with his vast creative force, that puts him at one step in the front rank. This is not said with the vague optimism of a reviewer but with due responsibility. For I know that a distinguished sense of form is the rarest thing in current literature. In England, for instance, we have many living writers of high and excellent talent, but we have very few stylists—and such as we have are very little known. Some of them write only in obscure papers, others, like the Doughty of *Arabia Deserta*, the Hudson of *Green Mansions*, the Douglas of *Syren Land*, are enthusiastically admired by a few and ignored by every one else. No doubt Conrad, James, and Hardy are known (though Hardy, apart from his introductory chapters and his peasant conversations, is often a very bad stylist), but in so far as they are stylists and do understand the art of prose they are probably distrusted. To be a distinguished writer, as apart from being a fanciful or precious writer, is to be, in England, almost entirely unappreciated. That is really the truth of the matter.

Though Conrad's individuality lies transparently

in every line of his prose yet it is (as his characters are) subordinate to the whole unity of the story. This is nearly always the case—for even in his earlier books he seldom obscures the picture, though the picture, itself, may be a heightened one. The ulterior motive, either of smartness or eccentricity, is lacking in Conrad's prose. It has the single-mindedness of the great artist—not the artist who looks upon style as an end in itself but of that rarer and truer artist who regards it as one step in the race. There is not a trace of preciosity in Conrad's prose. Its mannerisms are of a quite different order. For preciosity in the prose of fiction is generally mere prostitution, whereas mannerism may be a quite pure form of artistic egoism. Conrad's prose, and particularly his later prose, may not attract so much present attention for this very reason, but of course it will be appreciated at its extraordinary value later on, just as Flaubert's prose is now appreciated.



## CHAPTER X

### CONRAD AS ARTIST

IN the past chapters of this book I have had to discuss, now and then, the subject of Conrad as artist. It was inevitable. In this chapter I will gather up some of the threads. For instance, in regard both to his characters and his atmosphere I have had to impress on the reader the sense of artistic unity that underlies all Conrad's work—that sense which subordinates to the whole effect every individual part of the scheme. To understand properly any novel or story by Conrad we must see it in a perspective that encloses the entire thing. For it is the proportions of the completed structure that gives the final appeal to any work of art. There is neither a chapter nor a character in Conrad's books which does not have its proper value and which is not of less importance in itself than in its influence upon the total result.

The question of what makes a writer an artist is too often obscured by an over-emphasis of individual points. It is, for instance, a good thing not to repeat words, but it is better to repeat words than to strain synonyms. Again, a writer may be perfect in the rhythm and balance of his prose but he may be in-artistic through his very redundancy. Moreover, art requires in a novelist a certain attitude towards his work. The artist must be distinguished not merely in his technique but in his vision. That is why, in my opinion, Conrad is a greater artist than, say, Henry

James. For Conrad is concerned with a more actual world than Henry James, and consequently his art falls into more natural channels. However skilful and artistic a novel by Henry James may be, it oppresses one through its air of boundless triviality. These eternal, subtle conversations, these storms in tea-cups, cannot be the end-all of art. And I think one does feel that it arises from an over-emphasis in Henry James' mind of the importance of shades of a peculiarly inexpressible and spiritual kind—well, not so much of their individual importance as of their importance in comparison to that of other emotions. It is as easy to miss the realistic effect through over-detail as through want of perception. If you look too closely at a picture it is as meaningless as if you look at it from too far away. Broadly speaking Conrad is an artist because he sees his work in focus and in relation not alone to art but to life. Flaubert is, no doubt, more careful in his detail, but Conrad creates reality more effectively. For it is as a realist that Conrad is most impressive. All his artistic impersonality, all the co-ordination of his powers, has this in view.

It is a point I have had to lay stress on more than once. For that is one of his fundamental, one of his invincible beliefs. The spirit of his work is realistic in a rare and curious manner. For it is a realism which includes romance as one of its chief assets but which has a positive horror of falsehood. This realism encloses all his writing with an air of sincerity and distinction which gives it a "tone" no other modern work seems quite to possess. Let me quote two short paragraphs from *Some Reminiscences* to show, in Conrad's own words, his idea of the true novelist:—

. . . whose first virtue is the exact understanding of the limits traced by the reality of his time to the play of

his invention. Inspiration comes from the earth, which has a past, a history, a future, not from the cold and immutable heaven. (*Some Reminiscences*, p. 168.)

Even before the most seductive reveries I have remained mindful of that sobriety of interior life, that asceticism of sentiment, in which alone the naked form of truth, such as one conceives it, such as one feels it, can be rendered without shame. (*Some Reminiscences*, p. 194.)

And leading out of this realism we notice a significant thing about his short stories. It is this, that they always *are* stories and never mere sketches. Even in so slight a tale as "Il Conde" there is a realism at work to create convincingly the illusion of veracity. It works through imagination, upwards into an atmosphere, downwards into grasp of detail. For the realism of Conrad's art gives it that touch of life-like actuality without which art is so apt to degenerate into artifice.

And arising, also, from Conrad's realism (a realism tinged by romance, as I have said) is his dramatic intensity—which, I most certainly think, is one of the secrets of his genius. By his dramatic intensity I mean his marvellous power of throwing his own vitality over his work, of making his descriptions, his crises, his whole picture, *thrilling*. This dramatic intensity is more the servant of tragedy than of irony. Conrad, indeed, must be placed amongst the great tragic writers. And in saying this, I am referring equally to his power of tragic climax and his grasp of tragic fate in relation to character. But it is his power of climax that I have here in my mind. Think, for an instant, of the murder of Willems in *An Outcast of the Islands* (pp. 383-4), of the murder of Verloc in *The Secret Agent* (pp. 372-3), of the deafening of Razumov in *Under Western Eyes*

(pp. 359-65), of the torturing of Hirsch in *Nostramo* (pp. 379-82), of the suicide of Decoud in *Nostramo* (pp. 423-5), and of those stupendous passages which close this latter book. I will quote the description of Hirsch and this last description from *Nostramo* in full though they are not short. This is the first :—

He was working himself up to the right pitch of ferocity. His fine eyes squinted slightly ; he clapped his hands ; a bare-footed orderly appeared noiselessly : a corporal, with his bayonet hanging on his thigh and a stick in his hand.

The colonel gave his orders, and presently the miserable Hirsch, pushed in by several soldiers, found him frowning awfully in a broad armchair, hat on head, knees wide apart, arms akimbo, masterful, imposing, irresistible, haughty, sublime, terrible.

Hirsch, with his arms tied behind his back, had been bundled violently into one of the smaller rooms. For many hours he remained apparently forgotten, stretched lifelessly on the floor. From that solitude, full of despair and terror, he was torn out brutally, with kicks and blows, passive, sunk in hebetude. He listened to threats and admonitions, and afterwards made his usual answers to questions, with his chin sunk on his breast, his hands tied behind his back, swaying a little in front of Sotillo, and never looking up. When he was forced to hold up his head, by means of a bayonet-point prodding him under the chin, his eyes had a vacant, trance-like stare, and drops of perspiration as big as peas were seen hailing down the dirt, bruises, and scratches of his white face. Then they stopped suddenly.

Sotillo looked at him in silence. " Will you depart from your obstinacy, you rogue ? " he asked. Already, a rope whose one end was fastened to Señor Hirsch's wrists, had been thrown over a beam, and three soldiers held the other end, waiting. He made no answer. His heavy lower lip hung stupidly. Sotillo made a sign. He was jerked up off his feet, and a yell of despair and agony burst out into the room, filled the passage of the great buildings, rent the air outside, caused every soldier of the camp along the shore to look up at the windows, started some of the officers in

the hall babbling excitedly, with shining eyes; others, setting their lips, looked gloomily at the floor.

Sotillo, followed by the soldiers, had left the room. The sentry on the landing presented arms. Hirsch went on screaming all alone behind the half-closed jalousies, while the sunshine, reflected from the water of the harbour, made an ever-running ripple of light high up on the wall. He screamed with uplifted eyebrows and a wide open mouth—incredibly wide, black, enormous, full of teeth—comical.

In the still burning air of the windless afternoon he made the waves of his agony travel as far as the O.S.N. Company's offices. Captain Mitchell on the balcony, trying to make out what went on generally, had heard him faintly but distinctly, and the feeble and appalling sound lingered in his ears after he had retreated indoors with blanched cheeks. He had been driven off the balcony several times during that afternoon.

Sotillo, irritable, moody, walked restlessly about, held consultations with his officers, gave contradictory orders in this shrill clamour pervading the whole empty edifice. Sometimes there would be long and awful silences. Several times he had entered the torture-chamber, where his sword, horse-whip, revolver, and field-glass were lying on the table, to ask with forced calmness, "Will you speak the truth now? No? I can wait." But he could not afford to wait much longer. That was just it. Every time he went in and came out with a slam of the door, the sentry on the landing presented arms, and got in return, a black, venomous, unsteady glance, which, in reality, saw nothing at all, being merely the reflection of the soul within—a soul of gloomy hatred, irresolution, avarice, and fury.

The sun had set when he went in once more. A soldier carried in two lighted candles and slunk out, shutting the door without noise.

"Speak, thou Jewish child of the devil! The silver! The silver, I say! Where is it? Where have you foreign rogues hidden it? Confess or——"

A slight quiver passed up the taut rope from the racked limbs, but the body of Señor Hirsch, enterprising business man from Esmeralda, hung under the heavy beam per-



pendicular and silent, facing the colonel awfully. The inflow of the night air, cooled by the snows of the Sierra, spread gradually a delicious freshness through the close heat of the room.

“Speak—thief—scoundrel—picaro—or——”

Sotillo had seized the horsewhip, and stood with his arm lifted up. For a word, for one little word, he felt he would have knelt, cringed, grovelled on the floor before the drowsy, conscious stare of those fixed eyeballs starting out of the grimy, dishevelled head that drooped very still with its mouth closed askew. The colonel ground his teeth and struck. The rope vibrated leisurely to the blow, like the long string of a pendulum starting from a rest. But no swinging motion was imparted to the body of Señor Hirsch, the well-known hide merchant on the coast. With a convulsive effort of the twisted arms it leaped up a few inches, curling upon itself like a fish on the end of a line. Señor Hirsch's head was flung back on his straining throat; his chin trembled. For a moment the rattle of his chattering teeth pervaded the vast, shadowy room, where the candles made a patch of light round the two flames burning side by side. And as Sotillo, staying his raised hand, waited for him to speak, with a sudden flash of a grin and a straining forward of the wrenched shoulders, he spat violently into his face.

The uplifted whip fell, and the colonel sprang back with a low cry of dismay, as if aspersed by a jet of deadly venom. Quick as thought he snatched up his revolver, and fired twice. The report and concussion of the shots seemed to throw him at once from ungovernable rage into idiotic stupor. He stood with drooping jaw and stony eyes. What had he done, *Sangre de Dios*! What had he done? He was basely appalled at his impulsive act, sealing for ever these lips from which so much was to be extorted. What could he say? How could he explain? Ideas of headlong flight somewhere, anywhere, passed through his mind; even the craven and absurd notion of hiding under the table occurred to his cowardice. It was too late; his officers had rushed in tumultuously, in a great clatter of scabbards, clamouring with astonishment and wonder. But since they did not

immediately proceed to plunge their swords into his breast, the brazen side of his character asserted itself. Passing the sleeve of his uniform over his face he pulled himself together. His truculent glance turned slowly here and there, checked the noise where it fell ; and the stiff body of the late Señor Hirsch, merchant, after swaying imperceptibly, made a half turn, and came to a rest in the midst of awed murmurs and uneasy shuffling. (*Nostromo*, pp. 379-82.)

And this is the second—the final paragraphs in *Nostromo*, perhaps the most thrilling paragraphs in the whole of Conrad :—

From the moment he fired at the thief of his honour, Giorgio Viola had not stirred from the spot. He stood, his old gun grounded, his hand grasping the barrel near the muzzle. After the lancha carrying off Nostromo for ever from her had left the shore, Linda, coming up, stopped before him. He did not seem to be aware of her presence, but when, losing her forced calmness, she cried out—

“Do you know whom you have killed ?” he answered—  
“Ramirez the vagabond.”

White, and staring insanely at her father, Linda laughed in his face. After a time he joined her faintly in a deep-toned and distant echo of her peals. Then she stopped, and the old man spoke as if startled—

“He cried out in son Gian’ Battista’s voice.”

The gun fell from his opened hand, but the arm remained extended for a moment as if still supported. Linda seized it roughly.

“You are too old to understand. Come into the house.”

He let her lead him. On the threshold he stumbled heavily, nearly coming to the ground together with his daughter. His excitement, his activity of the last few days, had been like the flare of a dying lamp. He caught at the back of his chair.

“In son Gian’ Battista’s voice,” he repeated in a severe tone. “I heard him—Ramirez—the miserable——”

Linda helped him into the chair, and, bending low, cried into his ear—

"You have killed Gian' Battista."

The old man smiled under his thick moustache. Women had strange fancies.

"Where is the child?" he asked, surprised at the penetrating chilliness of the air and the unwonted dimness of the lamp by which he used to sit up half the night with the open Bible before him.

Linda hesitated a moment, then averted her eyes.

"She is asleep," she said. "We shall talk of her tomorrow."

She could not bear to look at him. He filled her with terror and with an almost unbearable feeling of pity. She had observed the change that came over him. He would never understand what he had done; and even to her the whole thing remained incomprehensible. He said with difficulty——

"Give me the book."

Linda laid on the table the closed volume in its worn leather cover, the Bible given him ages ago by an Englishman in Palermo.

"The child had to be protected," he said, in a strange, mournful voice.

Behind his chair Linda wrung her hands, crying without noise. Suddenly she started for the door. He heard her move.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"To the light," she answered, turning round to look at him balefully.

"The light! Si—duty."

Very upright, white-haired, leonine, heroic in his absorbed quietness, he felt in the pocket of his red shirt for the spectacles given him by Doña Emilia. He put them on. After a long period of immobility he opened the book, and from on high looked through the glasses at the small print in double columns. A rigid, stern expression settled upon his features with a slight frown, as if in response to some gloomy thought or unpleasant sensation. But he never detached his eyes from the book while he swayed forward, gently, gradually, till his snow-white head rested upon the open pages. A wooden clock ticked methodically on the white-washed wall,

and growing slowly cold, the Garibaldino lay alone, rugged, undecayed, like an old oak uprooted by a treacherous gust of wind.

The light of the Great Isabel burned peacefully above the lost treasure of the San Tomé mine. Into the bluish sheen of a night without stars, the lantern sent out a beam of yellow light towards the far horizon. Like a black speck upon the shining panes, Linda, crouching in the outer gallery, rested her head on the rail. The moon, drooping in the western board, looked at her radiantly.

Below, at the foot of the cliff, the regular splash of oars from a passing boat ceased, and Dr Monygham stood up in the stern sheets.

"Linda!" he shouted, throwing back his head. "Linda!"

Linda stood up. She had recognised the voice.

"Is he dead?" she cried, bending over.

"Yes, my poor girl. I am coming round," the doctor answered from below. "Pull to the beach," he said to the rowers.

Linda's black figure detached itself upright on the light of the lantern with her arms raised above her head as though she were going to throw herself over.

"It is I who loved you," she whispered, with a face as set and white as marble in the moonlight. "I! Only I! She will forget thee, killed miserably for her pretty face. I cannot understand. I cannot understand. But I shall never forget thee. Never!"

She stood silent and still, as if collecting her strength to throw all her fidelity, her pain, bewilderment and despair into one great cry.

"Never! Gian' Battista!"

Dr Monygham, pulling round in the police-galley, heard the name pass over his head. It was another of Nostromo's successes, the greatest, the most enviable, the most sinister of all. In that true cry of love and grief that seemed to ring aloud from Punta Mala to Azuera and away to the bright line of the horizon, overhung by a big white cloud shining like a mass of solid silver, the genius of the magnificent Capataz de Cargadores dominated the dark Gulf containing his conquests of treasure and love. (*Nostromo*, pp. 477-80,

I would like to point out one thing that these two strange and moving descriptions have in common, and that is the effect produced on us in each instance by the contrast of the utter serenity of nature to the disastrous turmoil of human passions. When, upon the agony of Hirsch's torture darkness begins to fall, and "the inflow of the night air, cooled by the snows of the Sierra, spread gradually a delicious freshness through the close heat of the room"; when, above the dead body of the old Garibaldino, above the despair of Linda, and the wreck of lives, we feel around us only the great peacefulness of the night, and "the moon, drooping in the western board, looked at her [Linda] radiantly," we experience an intense, dramatic emotion. These contrasts heighten for us the whole effect—make the night appear still calmer, softer, more immense, make the dramas more terrible, more vivid, and more absorbing.

These last paragraphs of *Nostromo* do seem to me extraordinarily beautiful. Never throughout the whole book does the smooth and gloomy vastness of the Placid Gulf weigh heavier upon our senses, never does the "lost treasure of the San Tomé mine" appear more enticing, more secret, more unobtainable. A wonderful and sombre eloquence vibrates through these sentences, an eloquence touched with mystery and with despair. The whole scene is muffled in the velvety darkness of a starless night. And the great cry that closes the book can almost be heard ringing out over the silence of the soundless gulf.

Indeed, the details of Conrad's art can seldom be studied more satisfactorily than in his terminations. He has the capacity of ending up on a note of splendid contrast or in a final burst of eloquence or memory. The close of *Almayer's Folly*, of an *Outcast of the*



*Islands*, of *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* of *Lord Jim*, of *Nostromo*, of *The Secret Agent*, amongst his novels, and of "An Outpost of Progress," of "The Return," of "Youth," of "Heart of Darkness," amongst his short stories are truly impressive. Throughout this book I have quoted a number of these passages, but I will give here two that I have not yet made use of—one from a novel, and one from a story. The first is from *Lord Jim* :—

Stein has aged greatly of late. He feels it himself, and says often that he is "preparing to leave all this; preparing to leave, . . ." while he waves his hand sadly at his butterflies. (*Lord Jim*, p. 451.)

And the second is from "Heart of Darkness": —

Marlow ceased, and sat apart, indistinct and silent, in the pose of a meditating Buddha. Nobody moved for a time. "We have lost the first of the ebb," said the Director, suddenly. I raised my head. The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky—seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness. (*Youth*, "Heart of Darkness," p. 182.)

The first of these quotations has the restful sadness that is typical of the Shakespearean ending of tragedy—a calm has settled upon the stormy sea, but such peace as it brings can never be what it was before. The second is the more modern form of a dramatic ending outside the drama of the story. Both alike are moving, more especially when we have the context clearly in mind. It is, indeed, very curious to study Conrad's art in regard to his manipulation of mood in a story. From the opening to the close, the march of events presses upon the emotion in exact ratio to the desired

effect. It is like the rise and fall of a Beethoven symphony.

And another form in which Conrad reveals his dramatic sense is in his short, swift pictures of states of feeling or of events. In such things he shows the eloquence of high prose-poetry. They are dramatic in the concentration of their imaginative appeal, and artistic in the choice splendour of their language. Let me give a few examples of what I mean :—

The clock began to strike, and the deep-toned vibration filled the room as though with the sound of an enormous bell tolling far away. He counted the strokes. Twelve. Another day had begun. To-morrow had come ; the mysterious and lying to-morrow that lures men, disdainful of love and faith, on and on through the poignant futilities of life to the fitting reward of a grave. (*Tales of Unrest*, "The Return," p. 262.)

. . . and she had about her the worn, weary air of ships coming from the far ends of the world—and indeed with truth, for in her short passage she had been very far ; sighting, verily, even the coast of the Great Beyond, whence no ship ever returns to give up her crew to the dust of the earth. (*Typhoon*, "Typhoon," p. 100.)

He had not regained his freedom. The spectre of the unlawful treasure arose, standing by her side like a figure of silver, pitiless and secret with a finger upon its pale lips. (*Nostromo*, p. 460.)

He was a little sleepy too, and felt a pleasurable languor running through every limb as though all the blood in his body had turned to warm milk. (*Lord Jim*, p. 20.)

The white Higuerota soared out of the shadows of rock and earth like a frozen bubble under the moon. (*Nostromo*, p. 33.)

Razumov stamped his foot—and under the soft carpet of snow felt the hard ground of Russia, inanimate, cold, inert, like a sullen and tragic mother hiding her face under a

winding-sheet. (*Under Western Eyes*, p. 30. I have already quoted this as part of a longer passage in a previous chapter.)

And then, of course, Conrad can be extraordinarily thrilling in the kind of eloquent silences that precede a storm. He knows how to create the uneasy excitement of suspense. Just before the typhoon in "Typhoon," just before the climax in "Heart of Darkness," just before the *débâcle* in "The Return" just before the confession in *Under Western Eyes*, there are pauses which remind one of the calm treachery of a whirlpool. These passages of Conrad's are amongst his most cunningly dramatic effects—the effects of a very great and daring artist. (In this view of Conrad's dramatic intensity I am, to some extent, putting my foot on ground already covered in my chapter on Conrad's atmosphere. But when I said there that his atmosphere was thrilling I had in mind his whole idea of atmosphere. Here I am thinking of the individual application of the dramatic instinct.)

And let me point out that Conrad possesses a power which probably no other novelist possesses to the same degree—the capacity for marking a sharply-defined edge in a few words. We may call this his own particular "stroke," and it does separate him very effectively from other men. Indeed, it is an artist's "stroke" which moulds his ideals. For instance, you can see it, as a friend of mine observes, in the different ones held by metal-workers, wood-carvers, and stone-cutters who have gained their ideals, which are all quite distinct, from having to work with different strokes (you can use the word here in its actual sense) in materials of varying possibilities. But, with it all, Conrad retains his full measure of romantic sensibility, and therefore there

is nothing harsh in his clear, precise imagination. Perhaps no other man of facts and exactness ever had such a poetic vision, and perhaps no other poet ever had the concrete so constantly before his eyes.

Complaint is often made of the long narrative conversations Conrad puts into the mouths of such people as Marlow in *Lord Jim* or Captain Mitchell in *Nostromo*, it being argued that the artistic reality of the work is injured by the impossibility of any one man being able to remember so much or to recount it with such finished and exact detail. But in regard to that I think we should bear three things in mind. The first is that Conrad, as I said before when discussing Marlow, gains by this third person form of narrative a definite perspective which is valuable to him.

And the second is that the introduction of a man like Marlow gives Conrad the opportunity of talking colloquially, which is more suitable for the purpose of a story like that of *Lord Jim* than the glowing prose of his own manner would be. Marlow is primarily there in virtue of Conrad's pursuit of reality. Though, even so, Marlow talks almost *too* well. His presence allows Conrad, himself, to take up a back seat and to write more closely to the actual matter in hand—the elucidation of a problem of character and environment.

And the third is, that realism in art is not a substitute for photography. Within realism itself the artist has a licence of which he has full liberty to make use provided the effects he achieves are not in themselves unreal. Surely that is the very foundation of art. For instance, however true a realist a writer may be he must pick and choose, he must avoid pointless banality, he must be careful to make his scheme

coherent. (The only person I ever heard of who construed realism in a stricter sense was the author of *Mr Bailey, Grocer*, in Gissing's *New Grub Street*—and I have grave doubts as to whether he lived up to his opinions.) But that careful selection is not like actual life, not at all like it. The truth is, that a chronicle of life as it really is would be incomprehensible—it would be the production either of a God or of a lunatic.

And it is from such a standpoint that I defend Conrad. When he chooses a narrative form to tell his story he does it because it suggests the reality he wishes to picture just as all art must suggest rather than assert. His effects are real and therefore his means are legitimate. Personally I do not like the means and I think that he does carry them too far, but it is only proper to explain his position. I daresay it is true that no one could recollect events so eloquently or minutely as Marlow, but the result is not strained and so the method can be accepted. Conrad is no less a realist on account of this than, say, Maupassant is a realist on account of his marvellous judgment in knowing what to take and what to leave. No, in the result it is even proof of his great realistic power. For no one but a great realist could conjure reality from so obvious an exaggeration.

Again, we know that Conrad (as in *Chance*) will sometimes narrate a story through the mouth not only of one but of several people. This is a curious point in his technique, because it shows his close comprehension of actual life. Apparently misleading, this is, in reality, the very epitome of everyday experience. Any affair of complexity that comes under one's own notice generally impresses itself on one under a variety of shifting lights—affected, as



it must be, by the particular media of transmission. Just as in life, the sum total impression of an event is ordered and logical and yet may be derived in an inverted, piecemeal, and scrappy form, so is it in Conrad's books. This method of Conrad's is actually a cunning touch of vivid realism.

Indeed, we have to admit, I think, that it is this overflowing vitality, dramatic force, and unexpectedness that make Conrad so obviously remarkable, at the expense, perhaps, of real appreciation of his other qualities—the qualities of subtlety, balance, and perspective. For, after all, it is the creative which is really vital. That is why it is impossible to be a great artist without being a great imaginative creator. Otherwise art is a mere simulacrum. But though a great artist must be a great creator, a great creator need not be a great artist. For instance, Meredith is not a great artist (though he “could do the best things best”), whereas Conrad is. Meredith's self-consciousness often drove him towards a form of robust preciousness, while Conrad's self-consciousness is centred first of all upon artistic achievement. Of course, the question of personality does make comparisons of this sort almost hopeless, but the general law holds good. And the general law is simply this, that there is no such thing as great art without great imagination, though the converse may not be true to the same degree. Indeed, I am tempted to say that it is very seldom true in England. Amongst well-known contemporary novelists, Henry James and George Moore are certainly artists, but, suffering, as they do, from a sort of anæmia of their imagination, their art is too transparently artistic—a thing still more obvious in their followers.

In the previous chapter I pointed out that it was

from Flaubert Conrad learnt the art of handling a crowd. This is the stage-craft of novel-writing in which the amateur never succeeds. But Conrad's touch is the firm and suave one of a master. His grouping of people conceals the machinery behind. His pictures are never angular or gauche. That is the sort of gift whose whole merit lies in invisibility, and consequently it is apt to be overlooked. But the amateur in fiction reveals himself as surely as the amateur in play writing. The crudities of entrance and exit on the stage have their analogies in the novel as certainly as the more obvious crudities of falsity and bad taste. It is the fine handling of a crowd or of a group of people which gives a novelist that grasp of a situation which is always so telling. It is one of the chief glories of men like Scott, Balzac, Flaubert, Tolstoy, Meredith, and Conrad.

Another point which I have made before is that, though Conrad's artistic methods are always changing and developing, his artistic aims are constant. Alike in his earliest as in his latest books, he has the same end in view—to create in the mind of his reader the sense of a definite situation and of a definite mood. Therefore it is very important to realise the artistic building and moulding process which takes place before our eyes, so to speak, in Conrad's work. Many people have complained of the structure of such novels as *Lord Jim* and *Nostromo* as being too roundabout, but they do not see that this arises partly from Conrad's intense desire to create a convincing atmosphere and partly from his own graphic and enquiring imagination—that imagination which causes his powerfully subtle brain to follow up the winding clues of an idea into all sorts of bypaths and involved hypotheses, forgetting, as it were, the presence of the

reader while he tries to discover the hint that will unbare "the secret baseness of motives." Perhaps, after all, none of his books exemplifies this better than *Some Reminiscences*—(though, in this direction, it is child's play compared to Henry James' *A Small Boy and Others*). There you have the ordinary facts of an adventurous life treated in such a curious and reflective manner that really one hardly ever knows where one is. And so with some of his novels. They may be further advanced on page eight than on page eighty.

Conrad again shows his artistic realism in the fact that his works are not overweighted with mechanical plots or improbable coincidences. No character can appear actual, when it is obvious from the first that its life has to fit into a preconceived dovetailing. Look at the *dénouement* of a book like Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*—it is too absurdly obvious that the author himself is pulling the strings of fate. Conrad can write a novel called *Chance*, he could never write one called *Coincidence*. There is all the difference in the world.

Of course, this artistic realism, this dramatic intensity underlying all Conrad's work is largely due, no doubt, to the fact that much of his material is founded upon his own experiences. (This is a point I made previously in regard to his characters and his stories.) To recreate the scenes of yesterday requires an absolutely sure grip on the essentials of romantic verity. Why Conrad triumphs is that he never loses sight of his main effect. Other men can picture past events but it needs a true artist to thread his way through a maze of detail without losing his sense of proportion.

But I want to express here my chief ground for

believing in Conrad's genius. And it is this. He has that power, very astonishing and very rare, of extracting from a thing already intensely dramatic a further and unimagined eloquence. In an existing scene, just as in a piece of music, one can nearly always foretell the next step. And that is why so much drama exhausts one's emotions—its pitch is too uniform and, as it were, too ordered. But at the very moment of crisis Conrad can extract just that something more from the material which, in a flash, seems to create a new world at our feet. You see that in his passages of description, of tragedy, and of romance. It is the power of surprising out of itself the cynical and *blasé* imagination of the sophisticated reader.

The originality of Conrad's art nowhere reveals itself more clearly than in his treatment of inanimate objects. They live for us in the emotion of the story with a kind of crooked vitality of their own. I will only instance the marble woman in "The Return," and the piano in *The Secret Agent*. They are not often mentioned, but by some means or other Conrad makes us feel their presence as though they had an almost formidable influence on the course of events. The aristocratic touch in Conrad's art (for in its fastidiousness and mastery it is very aristocratic) is apparent in his treatment of all such things. And, of course, it is apt to be misunderstood. Look at the Fynes' dog in *Chance* if you would see Conrad's real perspective. That excellent animal is presented with the greatest kindness but without any of the anthropomorphic sentiment with which Galsworthy would have pictured him. For the purposes of Conrad's art, a dog, however charming, is still a dog. It may play a significant part (in a sense a dog incident is

the pivot of both *Lord Jim* and *Chance*), as the piano in *The Secret Agent* does, but that is owing to its effect on the characters, not to any inherent capacity in itself.

In his choice of titles Conrad has been, at times, singularly happy and at times singularly unfortunate. What could be better than *Chance*, *Youth*, "To-morrow." What could be worse than *Lord Jim* or *Nostromo*! *Nostromo* is particularly bad. That this most unattractive title should cover this most extraordinary book is a real subject for ironical laughter. *Nostromo*—why, it conveys less than nothing! A thrilling title should have been devised for this thrilling and beautiful romance.

For, indeed, the more I study Conrad the more convinced am I that *Nostromo* is by far his greatest achievement. To read this book with understanding is to reach the highest pinnacle of Conrad's art—not perhaps the most perfect, but the highest, the most dazzling. Here are the birth-throes of a vast creative energy, the flight of romance, and the inward vision of psychology. But, apart from *Nostromo* we can study the art of Conrad most suggestively in such novels as *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* *The Secret Agent*, and *Chance*, and in such short stories as "The Return," "Youth," "Heart of Darkness," "The End of the Tether," "Typhoon," "Falk," "To-morrow," "The Duel," "A Smile of Fortune," and "The Secret Sharer." Roughly speaking, these are his most typical and most original achievements.

Though the names of some of Conrad's books are unsuccessful, the names of his characters and of his imaginary places are astonishingly good. They carry that sort of conviction which is immediate and final. Think of such surnames as MacWhirr, Hagberd,



Jacobus, Podmore, Singleton, Guzman Bento, Monygham, Verloc, de Barral, Roderick Anthony, such names of places as Costaguana, Sulaco, Higuerota, Azuera, Punta Mala, Pantai, Batu Beru.

Indeed, it is the details of Conrad's art that show, as much as anything else does, his artistic rectitude. In the first chapter of this book I said a few words about Conrad's sense of duty and I would like to supplement them here in relation to his art. No one who studies Conrad's art can fail to see that behind it all there lies an austere and pitiless conscience. An agony of creation has gone to every line. In a work like *Nostromo* one is even aware of a huge unwritten volume—a volume enclosing the whole history of Costaguana. For books such as *Nostromo* are merely the essence of a titanic imaginative effort. It is said that Turgenev wrote his novels at length and then cut them down to their present modest proportions, and, in a similar sense, we feel that Conrad's published works are but the gist of his profound conceptions. It is this tireless and earnest preoccupation, this ascetic faithfulness to an ideal, which is the root of artistic morality. We know from *Some Reminiscences* what Conrad underwent when, during the blind horror of creating *Nostromo*, a lady observed to him that "it must be perfectly delightful" to sit all day writing novels. It was as though the end of the world had come. And we can enter into his emotions if we have read his books. For, as Flaubert's books do, they give signs of a conflict as devastating and terrible as any conflict could be—not obviously, you understand, but beneath the surface of their romantic and ironical exterior.

In his earlier books Conrad's imagination sometimes

soars out of his grasp though it is for ever being brought back to earth by the magnetism of his art, but in his later books it is always under control. But all through his works he gives numerous hints of an exquisite nicety of artistic perception. That is why his few false steps do jar upon us so persistently. When, in "Heart of Darkness" the doctor requests Marlow to allow him to take the dimensions of his head because "he always asks leave, in the interests of science, to measure the crania of those going out there," we feel, at once, that it is too far-fetched, just as we feel that some of the dithyrambic passages in a story like "The Return" are too far-fetched. These are just instances, but, at any rate, they are instances necessarily drawn from his earlier work.

As an artist, Conrad assumes a definite position between his characters and his readers, a position which, as I said before, puts all three parties on an equality. Though this position does, I think, vary in his different books (it is now more aloof than it was), still it never varies during a book. He does not bewilder us by a change of front. (The nearest approach to an exception is "Freya of the Seven Islands.") Nor does he bewilder us by revealing to us his style as a self-conscious mastery of technique. He never thrusts himself (this I have also said before) between the reader and the story. Unfortunately that is quite sufficient to prevent some from admitting that he is a stylist at all. And yet I own that most people who consider Stevenson a great stylist (who are the kind of persons to deny style to Conrad) acknowledge that, say, Turgenev was a great artist, but then they think, probably, that to be a stylist is the same thing as to be an artist (which it may or may not be), but to be an artist is, primarily, to be a writer of

beautiful simplicity (which is one kind of artist, certainly, but only one). You can always refute or substantiate such arguments by concrete examples. For instance, Ruskin is a stylist but no artist, Flaubert is a stylist and an artist, Hawthorne is an artist but not much of a stylist, Turgenev is an artist and a stylist. And my contention is, that Conrad is both stylist and artist—but more equally both in his later than in his earlier work.

James Huneker says somewhere :—

“Conrad takes an interest in everything except bad art.”

(And, of course, when one is speaking of Conrad's art one has to remember that, in its genuine meaning, it includes his whole work. I use it here largely in the narrower sense for the obvious reason that through all my book I have been discussing it in the broader sense.) That remark of Huneker's shows how vital is his craft to a man like Conrad. Bad art is the one thing which his sympathy cannot embrace. There is nothing complacent about Conrad's attitude towards literature—whether his own or anyone else's. His aim is fixed upon the highest. However vexed may be the question of his achievement, there is no question at all as to his intention. That nemesis which awaits the satisfied can never overtake Conrad. The chief danger I can foresee will arise from his conscientiousness. In his desire to prepare the way, to create a convincing atmosphere, he tends to an over-elaboration of the foreground. But he has far too secure a hold on reality ever to become the victim of his own personality, as Henry James has become. Which is only to repeat once again that the true artist must be a true realist.

It is necessary to have clearly in mind this broader

view of art in regard to any writer's work, or otherwise we are only too likely to underestimate great writers who are not great artists in the narrower sense. For that is just as bad as the other popular extreme, which is to treat every writer as though he were a moral problem. It does seem to me that to worry over the incongruities of Shakespeare, the repetitions of Shelley, the *longueurs* of Dostoievsky, or the bad grammar of Whitman, is to miss the whole point. For in the bigger sense such men of genius are artists through the mighty power of their whole personality. And in that sense, too, as well as in the other sense, Conrad also is an artist. His ultimate appeal rests upon the unique force and subtlety of his imagination.

## CHAPTER XI

### CONRAD'S POSITION IN LITERATURE

I WILL say a few final words about Conrad's place in literature. I have no wish to dogmatise—these estimates of living writers are, in their very essence, highly tentative—nor is it my intention to try and “place” Conrad, thus undoing what I said in my opening chapter, but without going into prophetic extremes I can state a reasonable opinion. (There is all the difference in the world between a definite label and a comparative judgment.) I do not think I am exaggerating when I say that Conrad ranks with the great romantic realists of modern times. In a sense he is far easier to estimate justly than other English writers of his calibre because he does belong to a tradition, whereas most of the big English novelists start, so to speak, from the chaotic background of a hundred experiments. But, I repeat, only in a sense. For it depends to some extent on an appreciation of Continental literature. To anyone steeped entirely in English literature Conrad must be almost as obscure as Meredith would be to a Japanese—not transparently obscure like Meredith, but subtly obscure. For the difficulty in Conrad is not a verbal difficulty. It is quite possible to understand every word in Conrad and to miss the whole point. He puts up no danger signals, as it were. Meredith constantly wraps up a simple idea in complicated language, whereas Conrad develops his most delicate and profound psychology



in sentences that no one could misunderstand. In other words, the difference between them is not just that which there must naturally be between two men of outstanding power, it is also a fundamental and racial difference in point of view.

Meredith had the typical English qualities in so brilliant and excessive a form that one might almost believe he is not English at all instead of realising that he is, in truth, the most representative Englishman of his generation. On the other hand the very fact of Conrad's writing in English is obviously misleading. For he is no more completely English in his art than he is in his nationality. His tradition is largely the Franco-Slav tradition—and that is quite outside the *venue* of the English genius. The extraordinary versatility of the English mind has, in fiction, dissipated itself in innumerable eccentricities and originalities of the surface. There is no school in England which has general acceptance from the mature insight of the whole nation just because there is no school which is founded upon a national view of character. When Flaubert wrote *Madame Bovary* or when Tolstoy wrote *Anna Karenina*, France and Russia realised at once that here, without exaggeration, the typical life of their countries lay before them. But in England there is no such thing as high and serious realism. Our immense creative ability is rich in ideas, in lyricism, and in humour, but it lacks psychological intensity. And, in my opinion, that is the one absolutely needful thing to the making of a great novel. If one looks closely into it one sees, I think, that the Continental tradition (I mean the tradition started by Stendhal, continued by Balzac, and developed by Flaubert and the Russians) is not really *a* way of approaching the novelist's art so much as *the* way.

It is getting down to the bedrock of imaginative life—and surely there is nothing beyond that.

To the extent, then, that we admit this and have studied the forerunners we will find Conrad easy to understand—easy, that is to say, to get *en rapport* with. (The complete understanding of his characters is, of course, a matter of close individual sympathy—but, after all, that can only arise from close understanding of the point of view.) The more congenial Conrad is to one the more strangely familiar will his creations seem. For, as with all the artists of his class, the invincible reality of his figures is only enhanced by the innumerable subtle touches in which they are painted. We grasp them through their complexities, though the total result is simple and inevitable.

On the other hand, if we are steeped in the English method, Conrad may appear either fruitlessly obvious or as one floundering in a morass of his own making. It is quite true that he is famous in England as a psychologist, but it is in the same way as such a writer as Meredith is famous—as a man who understands the principles of action rather than as a man who understands the principles of creation. Meredith could tell you exactly how a certain type of woman in a certain class of society in a certain era of the nineteenth century would be likely to act in certain circumstances, but his woman would not be a real woman (or rather, her reality would be faltering and uncertain), she would be a typical woman. But Conrad would create the woman herself. In his sparkling gallery of feminine portraits Meredith never came near achieving a Winnie Verloc. And in saying this I am not wishing to decry Meredith. Few would deny that he was one of the most gifted men of his century. But the fact is, he was simply too clever.

Jane Austen, who had no philosophy, will long outlast the creator of *The Egoist*, and Conrad, who has the artist's aloofness from problems, has imagined a few figures which will, I believe, be known when nearly all the novels of Meredith are mouldering on forgotten shelves. One could write a tragic essay on the futility of cleverness in art. It is the whisper of the devil in its most insidious form. And it is this scintillating obtrusion of personality that is the canker of modern English literature. I do not say that it cannot be defended from one point of view, but I do say that it cannot be defended from the point of view of realism in fiction.

Moreover, Conrad seldom annoys us by expressing his own opinions, whether it be in the childish manner of Thackeray, the conceited manner of Shaw, or the irritable manner of Strindberg. When he does reveal himself he does it as Turgenev, himself, did it occasionally, with dignified and quick reserve. Of course, as all writers do, he shows likes and dislikes—but that is a different thing altogether. No one was less personal than Flaubert, no one was more biased.

And thus it is I consider that Conrad's fame in England, really considerable as it is, is nothing to what it will be. It is astonishing to hear his name mentioned in the same breath as that of a dozen living English writers. Indeed, it is not only astonishing but it is so incongruous that it is laughable. For it is not so much that he is abler than his contemporaries (I doubt whether he is so obviously clever as several of them) as that he is so immeasurably greater. And greatness in literature, as in any other art, is something beyond conscious ability. Who can summarise it? It is, at the same time, ap-

parent and elusive, and though its qualities can be analysed, its vitalising force is as intangible as a perfume.

But when we come to ask ourselves what Conrad's position in English literature, as apart from his position amongst his English contemporaries, really is, then we are face to face with a very difficult question. For instance, Meredith's name has cropped up in this chapter, and some minor comparisons between him and Conrad have been made, but how can one really compare two men whose aims are so divergent? It seems to me that there is no common basis and that almost the only way to do it at all justly would be by a broad generalisation. And one could only estimate Conrad's position in English literature as a whole on such a system of generalising. We have no Sainte-Beuve in England not only because there is little scientific spirit in our criticism but also because there is little of the ordered spirit in our creative art. And this spirit of order, this "tradition," gains in depth of originality from what it loses in variety of treatment. It concentrates upon one end instead of spreading itself in a score of directions. It would be easier for a Frenchman to understand Conrad than it would be for an Englishman. For the Frenchman's intelligence, keen and subtle as it is, is fixed upon actuality in a way that would appear almost wooden to an Englishman—the French have their "tradition" in their blood. I doubt whether in England Conrad will ever rank with the great masters. There is none of that queer national affinity between him and other English writers of his time that we see, let us say, between the great Victorians or, indeed, between almost all English writers. He is unique in an alien sense. That he will be appreciated more and more I am sure

is the case, I only doubt whether he will ever take his place among the generally accepted masters.

It is singular to reflect that Conrad, born a Slav, and knowing French perfectly, should finish by writing in English. For the Slavs, the English, and the French are the three races that have made modern fiction. Yes, the English as well as the French and the Slav. For, even though one believes that the English prodigality has resulted in mistaken ideals, one must not underestimate the richness of the vein. Insularity is not only a term of reproach, it is also a geographical expression. If we lose in one way, which is the best way, still we gain in many another. There is even a certain merit in our lack of perfection. For in the perfect there is a touch of weariness which is like the first breath of decay. One could discuss such a point back and forwards for ever, so I will not follow it up by bringing the names of Fielding, Scott, and Dickens into juxtaposition with those of the great European realists, but will leave the argument to the imagination. But to return—whatever one may mean by insular, one cannot get away from the fact that that is what the English are; in other words they are a people apart.

And yet I want to say something here which, though it may seem to contradict much that I have said before, is, nevertheless, perfectly true. And it is this, that although Conrad's "tradition" is more Franco-Slavish than English, yet he could never have written in any other language save the English language—could not have done it, in fact, any more than he could have been a sailor in any other service save the English service. To realise this clearly is essential and it is rather bewildering. It knocks a good many theories on the head. Conrad has long been a great student



and lover of the English novelists and though his novels are, essentially, not the English novel of character (which generally implies exaggeration) still they are quickened by a love of English life. And remember that Conrad's ideas and mind developed late and almost entirely under the influence of English seamen and English literature. He is imbued with the English atmosphere in a genuine sense. No, though Conrad is not English in his art he does belong definitely to English literature, for he would have been dumb in any other language but the English. This is not merely an argument to fit the facts, it is an absolute and incontrovertible truth.

However, when we say that Conrad belongs to a Franco-Slav tradition we have not said sufficient. As a matter of truth there is a deal of misapprehension as to the Slavonic influence in Conrad's work—and the French influence, too, is not to be traced properly without care. Because Conrad is a Pole people immediately liken him to the Russians. But Poles are not Russians any more than Englishmen are Americans. There is a common bond but there is also a common antipathy. Conrad has the Slavonic realism but he has not the Russian mysticism. The one is as natural to him as the other is foreign. Observe, that the Russian he is nearest to in spirit, Turgenev, is, himself, the most French of the Russians. As to Gogol, Lermontov, Tolstoy, Dostoievsky, Tchekov, Gorky, etc., a great deal of their work would decidedly lie quite outside his sympathy. For, indeed, there is not only a natural antipathy between Poles and Russians but there is also a political antipathy, which tends, very naturally, to make everything Russian offensive to a Pole. An imaginative Englishman would be more likely to appreciate the

mysticism of a Dostoievsky on the one hand or of a Whitman on the other than would a Pole—who would look at such things more in the manner of a Frenchman. And yet Conrad is no more entirely French than is Turgenev. His romantic spirit has a passionate basis which is as far from the frothy lyricism of a Victor Hugo as it is from the sombre pessimism of a Gustave Flaubert. Hugo and Flaubert were both romantics but neither of them had that quality of Slavonic melancholy which is, at once, full of belief in goodness and full of despair at life. Hugo believed in goodness, Flaubert believed in despair, but neither of them believed in both. For that double belief, held without any of the fundamental mockery with which such a man as Anatole France might be said to hold it, is one of the secrets of the Slav mind. The dual personality is the heritage of the North.

All the same, if one had to decide the question, I should be inclined to say that Conrad owes more to the French than he does to the Russians, and probably more to one Frenchman, Flaubert, than to anyone else. Conrad's attitude to life resembles in several ways that of Flaubert and his attitude to art is almost identical. I have said in a former chapter that the most conscious influence in Conrad is the influence of Flaubert and I repeat it here. In both there is a tireless preoccupation with their subject and their style—a *completeness* which is, at once, fervid and rare. (I need hardly state again that this does not imply that they are alike—all it implies is a similarity of aim.) The difference is that Flaubert appears always to have been mature, whereas the phases of Conrad's progression are visible. Moreover, Conrad has a sense of humour and sympathy which would for ever keep him from Flaubert's hatred of a class *qua* class. In

Flaubert's first novel, *Madame Bovary*, dislike of the *bourgeoisie* is strongly marked, but in his last, *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, it has become a painful obsession. The futility of the world is an ever-present theme in both writers, but that men are universally stupid or vile might be accepted by Flaubert, the Frenchman, but could never be accepted by Conrad, the Slav.

But, indeed, the Russian novelists had obsessions of their own, although they were obsessions of a different class. The use of the word obsession in regard to them has a wider meaning than it has in Flaubert's case. One feels a narrow blindness in Flaubert on the subject of the *bourgeoisie*, whereas the Russians were always supported by their philosophy. Still it often amounts to much the same. The omniscience and sadness of love obsessed Turgenev, the doctrine of forgiveness through suffering obsessed Dostoievsky, the horrors of culture obsessed Tolstoy. But as to Conrad, he, essentially, is not a mystical Russian, but a man of the world untouched by fanaticism of any sort. That is one of the causes, probably, why he is not already more famous. The reason is easy to follow and even to sympathise with. Impartiality has the appearance of a negative asset and artistic perfection lacks the inspired glow of faith. In his own way Henry James is as great an artist as Turgenev, but his works will never live like Turgenev's because he is too restrained and logical to be dominated by anything as Turgenev was dominated by the thought of love. In the long run it is Conrad's force rather than his sanity that will give him his final position.

But to talk once more of Flaubert and Conrad. There is something national as well as personal in the Frenchman's influence, for, quite apart from Flaubert,

Conrad's work shows an inherent sympathy with the French position. In certain phases his sentences reveal a thoroughly Gallic impatience of the superfluous word—it is much more often true of his later than of his earlier writings. Just as in the tiniest sketch by Maupassant there is an air of distinction which comes from a choice of words and an economy of language under exquisite control so is it with Conrad's most finished work. He has, in fact, the French lucidity of vision though, in expression, it is often clouded by the vehemence of his language or imagination. But, as I said before, Conrad has nothing of the Slavonic mysticism. In such a thing he is French to his finger tips. But though he is no mystic he has the French love and power over the mysterious. Who is more popular in France, the mystical Walt Whitman or the mysterious Edgar Poe? (The answer is obvious. Bazalgette does not weigh in the balance beside Baudelaire and Mallarmé.) This fascination of the mysterious is pronounced in nearly all the French writers of the last hundred years, in Balzac, in Hugo, in Flaubert, in Maupassant, in Anatole France. And in the same way, curiously enough, we find it in the most cosmopolitan of English speaking writers—Henry James and Joseph Conrad. "The Turn of the Screw," and "Heart of Darkness," have that touch of the *macabre* dear to the Latin heart.

And Conrad's work shows, too, the French prejudices and the French sympathies—swift dislike, generous enthusiasm, hatred of cant or fanaticism, an intense regard for the nuances of honour. If Flaubert has actually affected Conrad more than any other French writer one must still allow for the influence of Maupassant ("The Idiots" shows that

demonstrably), whose unrivalled powers of observation are one of the artistic wonders of the world, and of Anatole France, (are not he and Conrad alike exquisitely ironical ?) whose consummate ease of expression hides a real intellectual profundity.

These three French writers, with the Russian Turgenev, and the American Henry James, have, I think, been of more immediate importance to Conrad than any other of the moderns. (The influence of the older writers is a question beyond my scope, but one can argue with some degree of certainty that any work belonging to a great tradition has its obvious roots in antiquity. There is nothing consciously archaic about Conrad, whose writings are as free from the literary affectations of another age as they are from its spirit, but they evince, nevertheless, the germ of continuity. It would probably be easier, for instance, to trace Conrad's indebtedness to the past than George Borrow's.) But, of course, the importance of these five people I have mentioned is not to be exaggerated. Originality such as Conrad's has an incalculable element in it that asks nothing of any outside influence. As Ford Hueffer observes in his recent study of Henry James :—

Mr Henry James has, of course, his share of the talent which can't be defined. He has, that is to say, plenty of personality (*Henry James*, p. 14)—

a remark which might equally be applied to Conrad. Genius may be directed but it is primarily an elemental force. Conrad, it is true, owes much to Flaubert, but if Flaubert had been alive he might well have owed much to Conrad. The debt of genius is often immense but it is never basic. For the capacity of genius is the capacity of originality.



With Conrad, strictly speaking, England first enters the "tradition" of Continental literature, although Henry James had prepared her for the change. But there is just that indefinable want of substance about the creations of Henry James which precludes him from ranking with the great French and Russian realists. But Conrad's finest creations have the inevitability of Tolstoy's figures. However, if Conrad is the first he will perhaps, also, be the last English realist of the Continental type. For it is doubtful whether he will found any school in England. You cannot go against the spirit of a country. The Continent will no more become English than England will become Continental. Daudet is supposed to be rather English, and Meredith is supposed to be rather French, but as they each retain about 99 per cent of their own nationality the idea of a literary revolution need not alarm us. If Conrad is really Continental it is because he actually is a Pole and not an Englishman. His English sympathies are personal and have only touched his art apparently in a superficial manner, though one must always remember that without England there would have been no Conrad. It is true that if he had written in French he would never have written so exuberantly, but then the French language is a precise language whilst the English is a poetical language. And furthermore, this exuberance is to a large extent a personal idiosyncrasy, partly due to his life and mainly unaccountable, as are all idiosyncrasies.

It is certainly the case that Conrad has many English sympathies (his love of the sea is, in its passionate form, almost an exclusively English trait, and the very fact that he chose England as his home and English as his language are silently eloquent),

but in deep conceptions one cannot change one's nationality. In artistic ideals the Slav is infinitely nearer the French point of view than the English. And so Conrad's French sympathies are not so much an appreciation as are his English sympathies, they are an instinctive reflection of himself. In such sharp division there is no doubt some exaggeration (for instance, a fierce love of the sea might, presumably, be inherent in anyone quite apart from an English inspiration), but in making divisions there must always be this danger. I am coining, merely, a sufficiently accurate generalisation.

But, to sum up, it does seem to me, as I said at first, that Conrad must in future rank high amongst the creators of the modern fiction of romantic realism. There is no universal agreement as to the order of great men (artistic differences make as much bad blood as a war in the Balkans) and to discuss whether Conrad bulks more or less than others of his class would be fruitless. For, sooner or later, all such discussions leave the critical rails and merge into obscure personal opinions which are apt to be as assertive as a religious belief and are often quite as illogical. But that the author of *Youth*, of *Nostramo*, of *Chance* is securely with the really great artists, leaves, in my opinion, no matter for doubt. And yet this romantic and most thrilling writer will always be partially withheld from us because, beneath all the more obvious faults and qualities of his work, there is an unappeasable melancholy. His faith is too elusive for him ever to be popular. In such a thing he is nearer to Flaubert than to the Russians. And yet the subtlest creations of Conrad have a breath of life in them that is hardly to be found outside of Tolstoy or Dostoievsky. In that consideration he

comes closer to the Russians than to the French. So the ball is tossed from side to side.

But all such comparisons are vain in the end if they lead us to minimise the creative genius of the writer himself. What do categories amount to after all? They are only the dust of criticism. Greatness is something infinitely more precious and unanalysable than the qualities by which it is expressed. There are writers such as Meredith—to mention him once more—who lay themselves open to almost every critical objection and who are yet transparently great. (For no one who had such a power of grasping a situation could be called anything else.) And, in whatsoever guise it appears, genius is its own recommendation. Time alone can settle ultimate values, but extraordinary merit is discernible at once. To read Conrad and deny him that would seem to me like a contradiction in terms. For, in Conrad, it is easy, even for those who find most blemishes, to realise the unmistakable signs of distinction. In him England has helped to produce one of these unaccountable literary forces whose influence it is impossible to foresee. That is all that need concern us at the moment.



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### AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL

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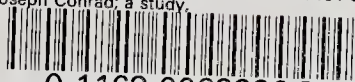
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